

# Goha the Fool

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**GOHA THE FOOL**



# GOHA THE FOOL

BY  
ALBERT ADÈS  
AND  
ALBERT JOSIPOVICI



WITH A PREFACE  
BY  
OCTAVE MIRBEAU


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TO  
OCTAVE MIRBEAU  
*Our Master and our  
Friend*



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## PREFACE

*It was a few weeks before the war. Two Egyptians, Albert Josipovici and Albert Adès, had asked to call on me. They had just published their first book, "Les Inquiets," with Calmann-Lévy. Maeterlinck, who had read the manuscript, had been so struck by this literary debut, which he thought the most notable of our period, that he had urged them to give up everything else and devote themselves to literature.*

*I invited Albert Adès and Josipovici to call on me. I was not over-expectant. I have had much to do with writers, and I feared to find my peaceful retreat invaded by literature. True, it does not irritate me as it once did, but it wearies me.*

*We had our first meeting in my garden at Cheverchemont. We spoke of Egypt, of my trees. I don't remember of what else we spoke. But I do remember that not once did Josipovici or Adès attempt to be literary. In their view of life, accuracy of observation was the chief concern. I recognised their wisdom. I offered them my friendship.*

*War was declared. I am not one of those heroic spectators who grow enthusiastic over the bereavements of war, and string sentimental phrases. Alas, I am only a man, and universal distress engrosses me too thoroughly for me to do other than brood over it and suffer.*

*Adès and Josipovici came often to my home. I knew they were confident in my country's destiny. I could anticipate their answers, yet I questioned them to still the misgivings that obsessed me. For months we spoke of nothing else. Sometimes I asked them if they were writing. They would answer evasively, and we would return to talk of the war.*

*One day they came to me with a manuscript. It was the first chapters of "Goha." I invited them to read it to me, not*

without some irritation. I resented their putting our friendship to a trial such as has estranged so many of my friends. Frankness is not a principle with me. It is an inner necessity dominating every other obligation. I have been told that I am harsh. . . . Why will people never understand that I am simply sincere? Why expect my admiration when I can give only my sympathy?

My apprehensions did not last long. Poor folk that we are, we never see beyond the obvious. I had loved the profound intelligence of Josipovici and Adès, the sane balance of their judgment—I rejoiced in their friendship, in our friendship—and never in all our long intercourse had I once suspected that they were accomplishing a work of genius!

“The Book of Goha the Fool.” . . . You will appreciate my emotion at the reading of these magnificent pages when you know my distaste for books during those tragic, bloody days which claimed our whole being—and more than our whole being. Some books achieve the miracle of gripping the mind despite the clamour of contemporary events: “Gargantua” and “Don Quixote,” “Jude the Obscure,” the masterpieces of Stendhal, of Flaubert and of Tolstoi. “Goha the Fool” is one of these; “Goha the Fool” achieves the miracle.

I have read all there is to read about the East, its own charming and fanciful tales as well as those of the dull and petty novelists of Europe. Quiet amours of our ministers plenipotentiary and consuls general, Occidental meditations before a broken column, a temple, a mummy—I feel an immense weariness at the mere memory of those platitudes. As for the Eastern story-tellers who delight me, who move me, they plunge me into a dream-world where I am intoxicated, but where I do not see. . . .

Only on the day when I read “Goha the Fool” did I understand the East, did I live in it.

Open the book, look into it: here we are given facts, facts not chosen from the most unusual, but from the most common,

from those that make up the life of every day. The authors have denied themselves the lyricism to which, alas, we fall too readily. They do not seek to allure the reader, any more than Nature troubles herself with the men who study her. You may understand, or you may not—it is the East that sparkles under your eyes, the East with its odours of jasmine and fried food, with its broad-hipped women, its artful wantons, its handsome brutes, its idiots, its intellectuals, its mystics. By means of a simple, austere style, as pure as that of Flaubert, the authors have lifted the veil for our Western eyes. The whole East seems to say, “Look, here I am!” And if, despite this truth, or because of this truth, you are blind; if, unable to see, you ask an explanation, close the book: the authors will explain nothing. Life does not explain itself—it is—and “Goha the Fool” is a part of life.

At first glance this life seems strange. Its very strangeness may appear seductive. But do not be deceived. Its characters hold us, not by what is unusual in them, but by what is general. Certainly, they differ from us. They are of another race. Nevertheless, the distinction is superficial—prejudices, a few habits. . . . And these prejudices, these habits do not hold a larger place than they should. Sheik al-Zaki, Sayed, Nour al-Ein, Hawa, are creatures of all time and of all countries. It is one of the chief beauties of this book that it is universal in its profound humanity.

This book is more: it is a creation. I come to Goha himself.

This creature who has no like in all literature, this idiot whom some will find merely a pleasing fancy, is, for those who seek, for those who think, an illumination—an illumination because, through his acts and his words, comic or tragic, he reveals to us his soul—the soul of all of us. He makes us feel it as we might feel an object with the fingers.

It is for the sake of the public that I wish this book success—the poor public, distracted by the literary over-production



of our day—this public conscientiously bewildered by popular authors. Let it read “Goha,” and may it have the discrimination and the honesty to recognise in this simple, powerful work one of the grandest manifestations of the mind.

In closing I will say of Albert Adès and Josipovici what I have already said of a few rare writers. They are of their own country because thought always needs a point of support, a sure springboard from which to leap and spread itself throughout mankind. They are of their own country, but they are also of ours, and of the whole world, like all those privileged beings who have known how to give a truth, an emotion, an eternal form of beauty to a grateful world.

OCTAVE MIRBEAU.

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

*The authors of this remarkable book, first published in French and since translated into seven other languages—German, Italian, Swedish, Dano-Norwegian, Dutch, Czech and English—are no less interesting in their careers than in their work. Octave Mirbeau in his preface has written of their genius far better than I could here, and the reader can judge for himself of the power with which they have evoked the very soul of Eighteenth-Century Egypt, and created a group of unforgettable characters. What Mirbeau does not mention is that the French they have used with such ease and brilliance is the mother tongue of neither.*

*Albert Josipovici, who is now secretary to the King of Egypt, was born in Constantinople on the 20th of December 1892. His first studies were in English, after which he studied at the University of al-Azar in Cairo, under Sheik Mustapha Abd al-Razek and Mohammed Bey Gad al-Moula. He went to France as a boy, and was graduated from the University of Paris.*

*Albert Adès was born in Cairo in February, 1893. His Arabic studies were also made at al-Azar, while he studied French under a private tutor at his parents' home. At seventeen he began to study law in Cairo, passing his yearly examinations in Paris, where he was called to the Bar at twenty, with special mention by the examining board. He collaborated with Josipovici on a first novel, "Les Inquiets," and then on "Goha the Fool." He died at twenty-eight, in April, 1921, leaving unfinished the manuscript of a novel of Paris, "Un Roi Tout Nu."*

*In the translation and transliteration of Arabic proper names and expressions I have had the advice of Shmuel bar Aiwass bie Yaqubh de Shirabode, whose invaluable*

*assistance I wish to acknowledge here. The forms that Arabic words may take when phonetically rendered into English are legion. We have tried to choose the simplest and most common form in each instance, even at the expense of the absolute accuracy that might have been demanded of a scholarly work. For instance, the word "sheik," so spelt, has become current in the English language, and this is the form we have chosen, although strict accuracy would demand that it be spelt "sheikh" or "shaikh." Wherever possible, unfamiliar Arabic expressions have been freely translated. A glossary of the foreign expressions that have been retained is appended.*

**M. C.**



## GLOSSARY

*Alif*, a vowel of the Arabic alphabet.

*Almeh*, a professional dancer.

*Babouche*, an Oriental heelless slipper.

*Bayad*, a fish.

*Borgo*, local term for the veil worn by women in public.

*Caftan*, a long-sleeved outer garment fastened by a girdle, worn by men.

*Chibouk*, a tobacco pipe.

*Dahabeah*, a kind of sailing boat peculiar to the Nile.

*Dinar*, an old Oriental gold coin.

*Dirhem*, an Oriental weight and silver coin.

*Effendi*, a title of respect.

*Feddan*, a land measure.

*Fellah*, m., *fellaha*, f., a peasant.

*Felucca*, a skiff used on the Nile.

*Franks*, a term commonly employed in the East at that period to designate Frenchmen.

*Gallabiah* (also spelled "jalabib"), the outer garment worn by women and working men.

*Hadith*, a set prayer.

*Haj*, prefixed to a man's name, is a title indicating that he has made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

*Hamza*, a diacritical mark used in Arabic calligraphy.

*Hegira*, the flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina A.D. 622, from which the Mohammedan Era is reckoned.

*Kadah*, a dry measure, literally "a cup."

*Kaimak*, the cream from the top of boiled milk.

*Kantar*, a hundredweight.

*Kef*, the state of being under the influence of a narcotic.

*Khamsin*, a hot, dry desert wind.

*Kouttab*, a school.

*Mamelukes*, formerly soldiers recruited from slaves. At the time of this story the mamelukes had great political power in Egypt.

*Mandil*, a handkerchief, knotted at four corners, used as a head-covering by women.

*Mellaia*, a large shawl used by women in public as a head-covering and veil.

*Mithcal*, a jeweller's weight.

*Muezzin*, a Mohammedan crier of the hour of prayer.

*Nabi*, a term used in addressing the Prophet.

*Narghile*, a water tobacco-pipe.

*Roumi*, a European, literally a Roman.

*Sajada*, a prayer rug.

*Salamlek*, the reception-room of an Oriental house.

*Sekia*, a water-wheel used for irrigation.

*Shadoof*, a crude lever arrangement used for irrigation.

*Shaitan*, a devil.

*Sheik*, m., *sheika*, f., a high Mohammedan ecclesiastic.

*Sidi*, *Sir*.

*Sufi*, *sufism*, a member of a mystic sect of Moslems, originating in Persia, and the doctrine held by the *sufis*.

*Tarabouka*, a tambourine.

*Wa*, a vowel of the Arabic alphabet.

*Wakil*, a manager or proxy.

*Zar*, a meeting of negresses for exorcism.

*Zikr*, a Mohammedan religious rite.

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## PART ONE: GOHA'S WORLD



# I

## THE SHEIK OF AL-AZAR

WHEN Sheik al-Zaki left the university, a few men sprang to meet him. They were neighbouring shopkeepers to whom, after his daily lecture, the master taught the rudiments of reading and writing. This evening he passed them by with a gloomy face, waving them aside. This bluntness astonished them, for the sheik had always been indulgent and kind in the face of their ignorance and poverty.

The courtyard of al-Azar, an immense quadrangle bordered by three hundred and eighty columns, formed, with the minaret-pierced sky, a world splendid and apart. Twelve thousand students from Maghreb, Sudan, Yemen, Turkestan, India, Persia, drank at this fountain of wisdom, the purest in all Islam. They were all lean. In their wide-open eyes shone a spark of fanaticism. Sons of noisy and sensual races, they concentrated all their vitality in the study of the book wherein is compiled the Word of God. Prominent veins marked their long necks, their shoulders were narrow and angular, their fingers long and thin. Around their felt caps they wore wide bands of folded cloth which covered their ears. Their faces were haughty, distant, sullen. Simple of faith, they ostentatiously despised the pleasures of the world. One could see hundreds who, grown old, continued to study. Having failed to obtain the title of sheik, they were ending their days on the very mats on which they had sat as children.

The masters were not like their disciples. One might have said that from the peaks of knowledge they enjoyed a comforting outlook. To see them robust, affable,

indulgent, one wondered how the philosophy that maintained the balance of their moral faculties and the health of their systems could so consume the sickly bodies that received it from them with such enthusiasm.

As he reached the entrance, Sheik al-Zaki was accosted by a student who, bowing easily, made as if to kiss his hand.

"No, no . . ." said the scholar.

He sketched a gesture of protest and continued: "May your evening be blessed, Waddah Alysum."

He studied the young man's face, with its pure, firm lines. Alysum's almost feminine consciousness of his beauty made him ever anxious to attract, and lent charm to his somewhat hard features.

"Father, will you enlighten me?" he said. "I need your counsel."

"Enlighten you? I thought you were bored to death! My lecture lasted two hours."

His face clouded suddenly and he added: "I am a poor teacher."

These words, spoken bitterly, surprised the young man. But already the sheik had taken him familiarly by the arm.

"Come," he said. "Come with me."

Alysum adjusted over his face a white veil attached to his turban.

"Vain as ever!" laughed Sheik al-Zaki.

Alysum, like Mokawa Kendi and Akr Zaid Tai, his friends, never entered a crowd with his face uncovered. They were usually seen together. Their thin, straight profiles were alike, and the perfection of their beauty had made their names known throughout Egypt. He answered emphatically that an emerald seems false on a coarse hand, and that in a poor setting beauty loses its brilliance.

"Be careful," said al-Zaki. "The wind is lifting your veil. . . . Some stranger's eye might turn you ugly."

“ You are making fun of me, father. Would you have me uncover myself ? ”

“ By Allah, don't ! The evil eye is on the watch for you. . . . ”

The people stood aside with deference as al-Zaki passed by. Sometimes they prostrated themselves at his approach, or, with a furtive gesture, kissed the wide sleeve of his caftan. In their little frontless shops, raised a few steps, booksellers, goldsmiths, cutlers, haberdashers squatted on their mats, chaplet in hand, busy with figures while murmuring *hadiths*.

Sheik al-Zaki, heir to a large fortune and ranking among the highest at the university, was restrained in his actions so as to give no one occasion for the slightest familiarity. Proud and kindly, he mingled with the crowd in the assurance that the tokens of its respect would be unfeigned.

He was small and sturdy. A short beard, already white, framed his round face. His piercing eyes were overhung with heavy eyebrows, dyed black. His whole face expressed authority ; but an occasional broad and graceful gesture, or a candid smile, revealed an indulgent disposition.

Alysum had chosen him for teacher because of the individuality of his opinions and the vigour of his speech. His friends, Mokawa Kendi and Akr Zaid Tai, had chosen each a different column, so that in their lives, alike in all else, the only divergence was one of ideas.

At the end of a lane more variegated than the rest they reached the home of the sheik. A massive and bare structure, facing Mecca, it projected into the desert like a headland.

“ Welcome to my home,” said the master.

He halted on the threshold and, pointing to a house standing almost back to back to his, “ That is Goha's house,” he said.



"How life loves contrasts," exclaimed Waddah Alysum. "The greatest sheik in Islam and the greatest fool in the world must needs live side by side!"

The two laughed loudly, not without a touch of affectation.

They entered a garden bathed in the warm odours of orange-trees and canopied with great gnarled sycamores; in the distance a little white building, cube-shaped and crowned with a cupola, enshrined the bones of an ancestor in the shadow of century-old banyans. The recital of his virtues still edified the living, and at times one might see a man slipping under the low entrance of the mausoleum to pray over the sacred ashes.

The gardener bowed humbly as two men passed, and Ibrahim, the eunuch, an old man with a thin voice and ebony skin, hastened before them to warn the women by clapping his hands that the master and a stranger had come.

"I am not disturbing you?" asked Alysum, as he entered the library.

"Stay, stay, my child," answered al-Zaki. "Your presence gladdens me."

They sat on a divan covered with green silk, and Sheik al-Zaki remained for some time with bowed head and closed eyes. He was telling an amber chaplet, pausing at times over the polished and translucent beads to mark the progress of his thoughts. Alysum eyed him attentively. The same contraction he had noticed on leaving al-Azar had reappeared in his master's features.

"I am fond of you, my dear boy, and that is what saddens me," said al-Zaki.

"I don't understand you . . ." stammered Waddah Alysum.

"My influence over you alarms me," the master explained. "Think what is in store for you if you imitate me! I am fifty—I am old."

He picked up a brilliantly illuminated Koran.

"Here is the truth," he said.

"God be praised," said the young man.

"God is great," continued al-Zaki. "How have I employed my life? This book—I knew it by heart when I was still a child."

In that difficult task he had been stimulated by thoughts of his ancestors who slept at the end of the garden, and whose story his mother had told him. Seated near the tomb, under the thick spreading trees, he had listened to the life of the saint and had resolved to follow in his steps. To the way followed by the sage he attributed a serenity like that which emanated from the smiling mausoleum.

Admitted when quite young to the University of al-Azar, at twenty he had been graduated a master by the unanimous voice of his professors and his fellows. He took a column in the immense mosque. Soon it was the one most thickly surrounded. It was seen that he had uncommon exegetical gifts. Sometimes, breaking the calm order of his course, he half rose and, with forceful gesture, developed a fervid interpretation. His fame as a believer was not long in spreading. However, more and more, and without anyone suspecting it, he fell a prey to mysticism. He spent whole nights in prayer. His face became gaunt. Often he asked the fakirs, pensioners of al-Azar :

"What do you experience in your trances?"

The fakirs would answer :

"We see God."

Also wishing to see God he studied sufism in long and secret vigils. At once he felt himself in communion with Omar Ibn al-Fared, Charamy, al-Heroui, Bestami, all the sufis, all those bewildered mystics who are condemned by the chiefs of the Moslem faith ; and he shivered with fear as he caught himself admiring the words for which Hallaj

was burned alive : " I am truth ; when you see me, you see God ; and when you see Him you see Us."

Thirsting for spiritual life, he imposed penances upon his body. Like Gazzali, he loved to climb at night to the top of the minarets ; cut off from the world, erect at the summit of the mosque, he gazed at the stars.

From these exalted nights he returned with bruised flesh, feeling that he carried infinity within him. But the bedazzlement of his faith had never led him as far as God, point supreme. He despaired of reaching Him by the irrational way of the mystic. He returned to simple religious practices and decided to follow the next pilgrimage.

Early in the month of Zoul-Kada the caravan of six thousand pilgrims started for Mecca. It took with it the sacred carpet, embroidered with gold and jewels ; lambs adorned with garlands of flowers, great quantities of provisions. Al-Zaki had provided himself above all with piety, as the Prophet recommends. Each morning he scanned the horizon for the line of the holy hills. He fasted one day in three. He did thus until the evening when the leaders announced : " To-morrow we arrive."

That night he walked away from the camp and, when out of sight, performed a *zikr*. For three hours he spoke the name of Allah, throwing his head and the whole weight of his body first to the right and then to the left. The two syllables issued from his chest like a rattling cough, his forehead paled, his eyes became sunken. At last, worn out, he sank down on the sand.

The next day, at noon, the caravan camped before Mecca, dazzling in the sunlight at the bottom of the valley. The pilgrims lifted their arms to heaven. Each cried, " Here I am ! . . . Here I am ! . . ." Al-Zaki cried with the others, " Here I am ! . . . Here I am ! , . . "

In the weeks that followed he piously observed all the rites of the pilgrimage. He followed the procession around the temple and along the route among the hills of Safa and Meroua, slaughtered a lamb on Mount Ararat, kissed the Black Stone, threw pebbles in odd numbers in the direction required, visited the wells of Zemzem. Then the fairs began. The pilgrims celebrated the last three days of the feast with great merrymaking. The young master of al-Azar, who had sought in vain for the divine revelation on the threshold of the Caaba, felt himself superior to this mass of misguided men, and in the depths of his heart he read the call to become a reformer.

Alysum listened enchanted to Sheik al-Zaki. The kindness, the lively intellect, the moral elegance of the master he knew, but not until then had he been privileged to hear him speak of the agonised battles of his life.

Leaving Mecca, al-Zaki undertook a preaching tour of the centres of the Moslem world. He preached at Jerusalem, Damascus, Ispahan, Tabriz, Constantinople. Driven from one city, acclaimed in another, he left behind him the impression of a prophet or a seer. In this prodigious circuit, hated by some, venerated by others, he stirred up for more than a year the drowsy masses of Islam.

“I swear to you, my dear, I spoke to them well. I explained clearly the true manner of reading the Koran. indicated the voice to assume, the letters which must be lingered over like a fruit that melts on the palate, and the syllables that must snap like the crack of a whip. Where one usually lengthens the ‘*wa*’ and ‘*alif*,’ I made of them short exclamations. My manner of reading the Koran induced piety because it brought man and the angels closer together and repulsed the demons. He who had followed me would have lived in perfect bliss and with ever noble desires. . . . They refused, Waddah! Some

said : ‘ We know already seven voices in which to read the Koran. No one has ever discovered the best of the seven. Now you reveal to us an eighth. It is an eighth source of discord that you would like to uncover.’ Others asked : ‘ Which of the Prophet’s companions read the Koran as you read it ? ’ Sheik Abu Omar al-Masri, whose illustrious name you know, asked me this question : ‘ If you shorten the “*wa*,” what will you do with the “*hamza* ” ? ’ At these words I understood that the world always closes in over a man’s words like the ocean over the wake of a ship, and I answered : ‘ Read the book according to your knowledge, I will read it according to mine . . . and God will judge between us ! . . . ’ ”

“ Ah, how gentle he is ! How tolerant ! ” cried Alysum.

He rose, and with a spontaneous gesture kissed the knees of Sheik al-Zaki. The latter smiled at this boyish enthusiasm. He bent toward his pupil and, placing his hand on his shoulder, said :

“ May you live, my dear boy ! May you live ! ”



## II

### ALLAH'S BLUNDER

**S**HEIK AL-ZAKI opened the window. Lamps were lighting up, dappling the walls with splotches of yellow and grey. The crowd was withdrawing into cafés, dance halls, smoke dens. Crouched beside basket or donkey, the merchants rested and exchanged ribald stories.

Alone of all his fellows, one itinerant food seller re-ascended the street in search of a customer. He had met none as yet, although he had patrolled the quarter again and again. From beneath the enormous tray on his head rose at times an appeal :

“ Send ! Send ! ”

“ Well, what do you want him to send ? ” called a vender of fried food, busy arranging his pans. “ You’ll pester Allah till you bring down some great evil on your head ! ”

A beggar, prone on the ground, bare-legged and bony-handed, sent up his lamentation :

“ Lord ! Pluck out this pain ! ”

“ Allah will be all mixed up,” laughed a fish peddler. Approaching the beggar : “ I’ve been hearing you groan for six months. . . . What’s the matter with you ? ” he said.

“ What’s the matter with me ? ” retorted the beggar. “ It would be easier to tell you what isn’t the matter ! ” He resumed his supplication : “ Allah ! Pity ! Spare me this leprosy that’s ravaging my foot ! Cure me of this cough that’s racking my vitals ! Give me back the eye lost ! ”

“ Enough ! Enough ! ” said the fish peddler. “ Allah

might better make a new man than patch up your old carcass."

Turning toward the food seller he shoved him forward by the shoulders.

"As for you, don't come deafening me again. . . . If you want to sell your garbage go to the Roumis!"

"Poor Goha," murmured Sheik al-Zaki as he saw the food-seller obediently move away. "Still another trade that doesn't suit him. It's quite twenty days that he has dragged his quarter of mutton through all the streets of Cairo."

Goha, clacking his babouches on the ground, repeated in dismay the words of the fish seller. Without doubt his provisions were no longer of the first freshness, the bean balls exhaled a fetid odour, the radishes were perishing. Nevertheless he raised again his chant: "Send! Send!"

"His father is trying desperately to make a man of him," said Waddah Alysum. "He ought to give it up and let him be."

"Poor Goha!" repeated Sheik al-Zaki. "How many strange tales are told about you!"

At intervals the food seller's call resounded, and Sheik al-Zaki felt a vague distress come over him. He placed his hand on his pupil's shoulder and looked long at him. The radiant beauty of Alysum and the appeal of Goha blended in his mind to a single gentle sentiment.

"Waddah," he said, in a low voice, "I have spoken to you this evening of my past as I would have told you the story of one who has disappeared. . . . Isn't it strange, Waddah? Everything in me is strange this evening. Leaving al-Azar, I rebuffed the good people who came to me to learn. Yet God is my witness, my heart is open to them. . . . Rather than meet my illustrious colleagues this evening, I would see the whole city crumble—and yet you know in what fraternal esteem I hold them. I don't

dare go to the bottom of my thoughts, Waddah. . . . Think ! Only this morning I grew hot over the arguments that Sharaf-nd-Din al-Taiibi opposes in his *Futouh al-Ghaib* in the ' Revelation ' of al-Zamakushari. . . . For years I have been refuting the doctrines of the Sunnites, the Himyarites, the Mutazelites. . . . Each doctrine, each argument has graven a line in my forehead. . . . And now, this evening, all at once, I seem to feel that a man may live and be happy without ever resolving the grave problems that haunt my mind. . . . I seem to feel that a water-carrier is not necessarily less happy than a sheik."

Shrill cries and guttural laughter, canalised in the narrow streets, rose to the window. Women, carelessly trailing their skirts in the running gutters, talked and gesticulated with fellahs. At times an exclamation would enlighten the stranger on the nature of these low-voiced colloquies.

" At that price, I could buy a donkey ! "

" Just as you like," answered the woman.

The couple moved away in silence, the woman first, the man behind. The promise of pleasure made no bond between them. Sheik al-Zaki, who had leaned out the better to hear them, followed the couple with his eye until they disappeared through a low doorway.

" Waddah," he said, " I am in love."

Thinking the sheik ironical the young man smiled stiffly.

" I am in love, Waddah," continued the master soberly.

" But I don't know with whom. Do you understand that, you who are an expert in love ? "

Alysum, taken aback, did not answer.

" It is time I took a little pleasure," the old man went on. " I want a beautiful girl, very plump, very white, to be the joy of my old age."

"May I speak?" asked Waddah Alysum.

"Speak."

The young man turned meek and imploring eyes on Sheik al-Zaki, raised his palms heavenward and said:

"Dear and illustrious master, I fear for your brain."

"Not at all! Not at all!" said Sheik al-Zaki, annoyed.

"I fear for your brain, dear and illustrious master," repeated Waddah Alysum, visibly distressed.

"Go on, my dear boy! My brain? Go on!"

"Nevertheless, the adventure of love is full of perils. . . ."

"Stop. You'll make me angry!" cried al-Zaki.

He leaned out. The street was silent. Here and there a group of workmen or peddlers. . . . In the glow descending the steps of the mosque two or three recumbent figures sought rest. The beggar on his crutches was moving away gingerly, with infinite solicitude for his aches. The houses, with their closed doors and windows, seemed to have lapsed into eternal sleep. . . .

Like some profaner, Goha advanced, pale, his eyes sunken with fatigue, and in a strong voice flung his appeal into the night. Not since he had entered upon his career had he encountered such indifference to his wares. It seemed to him that by the power of some evil spell the streets emptied themselves at his approach.

"Send! Send!"

He changed his call abruptly. He had suddenly realised that the magic had gone out of his abbreviated formula, and that Mohammed was displeased. He recalled the complete sentence and cried fervently:

"Send me those who are hungry!"

At once, with a rustling of wings, an immense shadow glided over his head: the quarter of mutton, gripped in the claws of a hawk, mounted heavenward. The tray rolled on the ground, the bean balls sank in the mud.

Goha did not grieve, and it was with a gentle voice that he called the Prophet's attention to his blunder :

" You made a mistake, Nabi. I was asking you for a customer."

" What are you complaining for ? You asked for a customer. He came to you from the sky," said the fried-food seller with a roar of laughter.

Then it was the turn of the water-carrier :

" You asked for those who were hungry. The hawk was hungry."

Goha, in the midst of disaster, thanked them for so much solicitude, and the water-carrier, to emphasise the strangeness of his thought, clapped his hands :

" Allah himself has made fun of Goha ! " he exclaimed.

As for Sheik al-Zaki, he said to his companion :

" How can men understand each other when so much misunderstanding can exist between a creature and the God Who created him ? . . . "



### III

#### THE FAMILY OF HAJ MAHMOUD

**T**HE next day, at the first glow of dawn, Haj Mahmoud Riazzy entered the room of his son. Goha awoke with a start. His father's wrathful face augured some evil. He looked around. The ceiling was intact, the walls the same; the dresser under the window had not been disturbed. This familiar scene reassured him. He smiled at all the peaceful furniture. He smiled at his father.

"May your day be blessed," he said.

"Get up!" roared Mahmoud.

He seized his son by the shoulders and rolled him out on to the carpet. At this moment Zeinab, his oldest wife, and Hawa, the negress, appeared at the door. They shrieked in astonishment.

"Don't you know him?" cried Zeinab, throwing herself between her son and her husband.

"Don't you know him?" repeated the slave, clutching her master by the bottom of his caftan.

New arrivals slipped into the room. First Hellal and Nassim, the younger wives of Haj Mahmoud, who interceded at once for Goha; then, one after another, the nine daughters of the house, none of whom was of age to wear the veil, and who took possession of every piece of furniture, every corner of the room.

Mahmoud, mindful of his dignity, had mastered his anger. But the women, thinking him still in a state of furious exasperation, held him with all their might. The more he tried to free himself, the more they clung to him,

begging him to calm himself. "But I *am* calm!" he cried. "I *am* calm! Leave me alone! . . ."

"Don't lose your temper; calm yourself!" groaned Zeinab, clinging to his leg.

"Don't lose your temper!" repeated Nassim, bursting into sobs. "I'm afraid for your health."

"I *am* calm, since I tell you I am calm!"

"See how red you are!"

Mahmoud stopped speaking for a moment, smiled, and with a voice that strove to be gentle: "Well! There!" he said. "To please you I have calmed myself."

Unwillingly they released their grip, still watching him closely. He passed his hand over his brow, damp with sweat, took a great breath of air, and, pretending not to notice the presence of the women, returned to Goha, who crouched on the very spot where he had fallen. He considered him bitterly.

"Don't fear," he said, after a pause, "I am not going to hurt you. But I have to tell you that from now on you will live like your mother."

A murmur of astonishment greeted this announcement. Goha, his eyes fixed on Hawa, his old nurse, mutely implored the aid of her intelligence. That his father was very angry he could not doubt. But the cause of this outburst that culminated in such a mysterious pronouncement escaped him altogether.

"I wonder sometimes what I have in common with you that you should be my son," continued Mahmoud. In the contrast between himself and his son he found the balm for his pride that he had sought in vain in his paternity. "I must," he added, "have committed some terrible sin for the Just One to scourge me with your birth."

The women looked at each other and shook their heads. The daughters, already tired of keeping still, began to

make faces at each other, to wink their kohl-rimmed eyes, to puff their thin cheeks, without appearing at all to disturb the flies that dotted their faces and that they carried about from morn to night through the house. Mahmoud re-established order with a vigorous voice and continued :

“ From your earliest years you made yourself a name for stupidity. At the *Kouttab* you were the despair of the best teachers. . . . You wrapped your cheese in the leaves of your Koran. . . . You don’t know how to read or write ! ”

Goha turned to Mahmoud a sad and passionately earnest look. He aspired only to submit, but he had to know what was wanted of him, and he suffered from his inability to understand.

“ At twenty-five you have neither position nor respect in the world ! ” cried Mahmoud. “ One could not say of you that you are the son of your father. . . . ”

While the women repeated in chorus : “ No, one could not say that. No, indeed, one could not say that,” he added :

“ And it hurts me. . . . Why must you be a peculiar and strange creature ? I’ve done what I could for you, without result. Even to-day I would still be ready to advise you and guide you in the right path . . . but how ? ”

Calling his wives, Hawa, his daughters even, to witness, he asked plaintively :

“ Hasn’t he tried every trade ? ”

They assented in chorus :

“ Yes, master, he has tried every trade.”

“ Haven’t I always been patient with him ? ”

“ Yes, master, you have always been patient.”

Mahmoud shrugged his shoulders and a flush spread over his cheeks at the memory of the daily humiliations this only son had caused him. He had greeted the birth of

Goha with generous feasts, with prayers and distributions of flour. Happy to have assured himself of male descent, he had followed with interest the development of his son who had early caused him concern. "All my friends call him beautiful. Everybody adores him," Zeinab would always exclaim when Mahmoud imparted to her his apprehensions, and, to rout the evil powers that her mother's enthusiasm had awakened, she would add quickly: "Allah preserve him, he is the ugliest child in the quarter."

Goha, however, having reached his twelfth year, found great difficulty in understanding and speaking.

In a long sentence he would pronounce only two or three words distinctly. But the perfection of his features and the elegance of his appearance dazzled his mother and his nurse. "He is the ugliest child in Cairo," Zeinab would say. . . . "He is the ugliest child in the world," said Hawa. They sewed on his clothes amulets bought from sorceresses, and each evening Hawa spat on the child's head to offset the evil spells of the neighbouring nurses, whom she knew to be jealous.

The boy's studies confirmed Mahmoud's fears. Never did he succeed in deciphering the Koran.

In fifty-six months he learned to repeat short prayers with the proper attitudes. Renouncing his hope of making him a scholar, a prayer-leader or a physician, Mahmoud, who owned a pottery works, took his son into the business. Goha's entry into the workshops was marked by considerable breakage, and Mahmoud was forced to curtail his ambition again. First mercer, then tobacco-seller, fez-ironer, toyman, Goha had accumulated financial disasters until, so as not to be dishonoured altogether by idleness, he came into his position of itinerant food seller.

"Even that . . . even that . . ." said Mahmoud, clapping his hand to his forehead.

His eyes rested on his daughters, the nine daughters who with Goha and his three wives composed his household. The fate of his house did not appear propitious. He remembered the chaffing of his customers each time a child was born :

“ Well, Mahmoud ? ”

“ A girl. . . . ”

“ Ah, a girl ? . . . ” They gave him friendly pats on the shoulder.

At first they had commiserated. When the twelfth girl arrived—three had died—they hailed each other in the streets to impart the news with sarcasm and hypocritical consternation.

Mahmoud thought with pain of the pride his friends scarcely concealed as they presented to him their grown-up sons, already sheiks or heads of a business. Still he hoped by the mercy of the Almighty to obtain a worthy successor in his works. But faced by all these little braids, all these faces so much alike, he wondered if he was not cursed in his issue. Were they really his, all these creatures who had not answered his wish ? They inspired no emotion in him, he scarcely knew them, he even confused their ages and their names. Such as he was, Goha belonged to him more, by the first joy that had marked his arrival. . . . He made a last attempt and addressed his son :

“ Come, explain yourself,” he said. “ Your tray is dented, the bowls are in pieces, the bean balls are covered with mud, the quarter of mutton is missing, and you haven’t brought home any money. Explain yourself ! ”

Goha retained no more than a vague memory of his encounter with a hawk, and the threatening attitude of his father increased the pain of his effort to recollect.

“ You won’t say anything ? You fell, perhaps ? Answer me ! You danced with your tray on your head, maybe ? ”



"The will of God," hazarded Goha.

"The devil take you!" retorted Mahmoud.

Before leaving the room he concluded, facing his son:

"I was simple enough to hope to hear you speak an intelligent word. . . . Unfortunately the thing is impossible. . . . The only thing left for you is to live like your mother."

Goha shuddered. What was wanted of him? Instead of explaining Haj Mahmoud's sentence, Zeinab threw herself on her son and, in a voice loud enough for her husband to hear, reproached him for his ingratitude.

"Your poor father breaks my heart!" she cried. "He's done all he could for you; he has given his life blood so he could be proud of you."

"It keeps me awake at night," said Hellal.

"I swear by the pupil of this eye," said Nassim, pulling her eyelid with her finger-tips, "I have no more desire to eat, nor to go, nor to come. . . ."

To win the good graces of Mahmoud they were indignant over this wicked son who had grieved their master.

"You are not worth your father's finger-nail!"

"Not even the parings of his finger-nail!"

"The parings of his finger-nail!" Nassim fumed. "Are you angry with Mahmoud that you compare the parings of his finger-nail to this idiot?"

They left at last, satisfied with themselves, their large bellies protruding and their hips rocking. In the ante-chamber they glanced at Mahmoud, seeking to discover if he had appreciated their support.

The nine sisters of Goha started in their turn. They came cautiously out of their corners, placed themselves in single file, each holding the other's dress, skirted the walls and, training glaring eyes on their brother, started for the door. Their bare feet protruded from straight, gaudy gallabiahs. Handkerchiefs embroidered with



spangles covered their woolly hair. A little braid, lengthened to the waist with woollen threads, hung from it black and puny. Each movement shook the turquoise and the clove of garlic they wore on the forehead to ward off evil spells.

"Where are you going?" asked Goha.

They answered all together with cries of fright, then stuck out their tongues, made frightened gestures, and fled the room in disorder, shrieking and laughing at the same time, happy to be noisy again.

"Naturally," said Hawa in a very low voice, so as not to be heard by her master, and approaching Goha, whom she alone had not deserted, "naturally, it isn't a trade for you. Whoever has seen a Riazzy walking the streets with a tray on his head?"

"I was happier when I was a fez-ironer," said Goha, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes, but you scorched all the fezzes in the quarter," answered Hawa. "That trade wasn't worthy of you, either." She added: "They say you're not intelligent. I think you are very intelligent. Haj Mahmoud ought to take you back into his business now you have had some experience."

Goha motioned her to sit beside him and asked her what was his father's decision. She sat down and explained with simple words that he would have to give up his tray of eatables and live in idleness.

"Oh, Nurse!" exclaimed Goha, his face beaming, "my father needn't have got angry about that!"

All the fearsome images that Mahmoud's lecture had evoked in his mind disappeared. He had understood. He was saved. He hugged his nurse, whose flat black face expressed infinite goodness.

"Hawa! . . . Hawa! . . ."

"My master! . . . My master! . . ." she answered.

Stretched on the mat, her large limbs sprawling, she gave herself up to childish joy. She was happy to have delivered Goha from his distress, and she shook with little laughs. Goha lavished on her a thousand caresses, pinched her arms and her thighs, pulled her hair. She had, with simple words, dissipated his fears. He was filled with gratitude and also with admiration.

“Hawa, you are a sheika !”

“And you, you are a sheik !”

And the two laughed and laughed and laughed.

## IV

### GOHA'S WORLD

**T**HE tray was sold, as were the other utensils, and what remained of the food, the beans, the onions, the radishes, dried by the sun and wind, was given to the poor.

Goha remained cloistered at home for a week. His afternoons were peaceful, but in the mornings he led a wretched life. Pursued by the broom of Hawa, busy with her housekeeping, he wandered from room to room. As soon as he sat on a divan he lost the sense of his present idleness. He found himself again on the go through the crowded streets; he heard himself crying: "Send! Send!" Carried away by the reality of his vision he would sing the two syllables in a low voice. Then Hawa would laugh.

"It's all over," she would say. "There is no more 'Send! Send!' Now it is Mahmoud Mustapha who does the quarter. If you had been a serious boy you wouldn't be bored as you are now."

Goha watched her with his big eyes, anticipating already the obsessing sentence, the never-ceasing sentence:

"Come, master, I have to clean up. Go and sit in another room."

No plea, no threat, no argument would deliver him from the negress's tyranny. If he pretended not to hear, she would approach him, shake him and repeat more loudly:

"Master, I have to clean up."

One day, when he was particularly comfortably seated, he declared, his hand spread on his breast:

"Hawa, this room has already been swept."

Without even contradicting him the negress, her dress hitched up around her hips, pulled up the carpet and splashed the contents of her basin on the flagstones.

This defeat made Goha decide to cross the threshold and sit by the roadside. He found a pleasant diversion in the sights of the street. Men, donkeys, camels passed, who seemed to express in their slow progress a profound indifference to their destination.

But there were also the merchants. They bobbed up with violent jokes and coarse laughter at the very moments when Goha felt most content with life. Existence was impossible for him on the paternal threshold. He resolved to adventure very far.

One hot day of the month of Shaaban he slipped with rapid step among the small carts, skirted the groups of men, careless of the peddlers' cries, the donkeymen's curses, the lamentations of the cripples and the blind.

"Son of a slipper, where are you going?"

"I didn't notice you," stammered Goha.

"By God, when you go walking you take your stupidity along and forget your eyes!"

"May your day be propitious," said Goha.

It was Sayed, the orange-seller. Wearing a gallabiah of blue cotton stuff, that left his muscular legs bare and gaped over his chest, he stood with five of his fellows. He had put down his still full basket, and his muddy foot rested carelessly on the fruit that flamed red in the noonday sun.

"May your day be propitious. . . . May your day be propitious, idiot!" he said, imitating Goha's voice, encouraged by the laughter of peddlers, of beggars who came running to view the scene, and of naked and plump-bellied children who threaded their way among the legs to get a better look. He seized the back of Goha's neck with the palm of his hand.

"You are a pretty boy, Riazzy. . . . Good and plump, good and round, well fed . . . pretty boy, by Allah, pretty boy ! . . ."

The audience was laughing already, amused by Goha's face and anxious to please Sayed, whose solid shoulders impressed them. The latter stroked the heavy black moustache that barred his face and that he wore turned up after the fashion of the Greek spice-sellers of the quarter. He winked at his friends and, turning to his victim, assumed a fierce expression :

"Come on ! Show us your backside."

A general burst of laughter greeted this magnificent whimsey of the orange-seller.

"Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! . . . Ha ! Ha ! Ha !"

The spectators rained blows on each other, the better to excite themselves to gaiety.

"If you have one, why do you hide it ?" cried the water-carrier.

"He hasn't got one," said another.

"He sold it with his bean balls," explained a third.

Goha, a prey to growing discomfort, remained motionless, arms hanging, bewildered by the uproar. Children were clinging to his clothes, trying to undress him. He struggled as best he could against these tiny clutches, against all these little hands that clung to his body like nippers of steel. Sayed bent down and swept the children away with one stroke of his arm.

"Thank you, thank you," sputtered Goha.

"Now, you'll do it yourself !" commanded Sayed.

"Let me go !" begged Goha, with a despairing smile.

"By Allah, I won't let you go !" answered the peddler, flipping him on the cheeks. And in a rough voice he repeated : "Come on ! Hurry up ! Show us your backside."

Goha seized his gallabiah and drew it around his legs in a rage.

"No," he muttered.

"Then I'm going to choke you," calmly announced the peddler.

Sayed felt an invincible hatred for the son of Haj Mahmoud Riazzy. A voice whispered to him: "Kill him! Kill him! . . . Crush him." One would have said that the spectators had heard that inner voice, for they began to intercede, feebly at first.

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter . . . let him be. . . ."

"Why fool with him? You can see he's an idiot."

Around Goha's neck the fingers relaxed, tightened. The man was by turns enticed and frightened by the thought of the crime.

"You'll tire yourself out with that bull. . . . Better come and have a cup of coffee with us. . . ."

At this intervention from one of his friends all the fellah's malice spent itself in a burst of false laughter. He released Goha and, aiming a kick at his back, "Run along," he cried, "you are an ass and I was making fun of you!"

Liberated, Goha moved away, while the crowd endeavoured to console the peddler. "I did well not to show them my backside," Goha thought smilingly, "because they would have said I was a trollop."

The sun that stabbed his neck drenched the refuse piled up by the doorsteps. Now and then a dog, devoured with sores, tongue hanging, avid of coolness, tossed up with its paws the rags, the rotten vegetables, the melon and cantaloupe rinds, dry as parchment, and feverishly dug its muzzle into the layers of still damp garbage. Goha crossed bazaars alive with the cries of merchants, emerged into squares gay with the thin music of fountains, beside which buffaloes dozed. On the steps of a mosque two negroes were fighting. A row of spectators three-deep



discussed the odds of the encounter. He avoided the group and continued on his way. The clamour of men assaulted his ears, the fetid air of the city oppressed his lungs. He needed to breathe freely, to seclude or, rather, to lose himself in a world more in harmony with his nature. But, lacking the intelligence of his instinct, he was but an urge groping to satisfy itself. Driven by an insensate force he wandered aimlessly, with a blind and peaceful obstinacy. He was about to round a dazzling white wall when a janissary, his belt adorned with damask yatagans, barred the way and fetched him a blow over the shoulders with a stick.

“ You can’t pass here. This is the Mameluke’s palace.”

Retracing his steps Goha brought up against another wall, behind which lurked another of these imposing personages.

“ Where are you straying, mule ? I’ll break your bones ! ”

“ They all want to kill me,” mused Goha. “ And one calls me a mule and another a bull ! . . . ”

At length he reached a little hamlet on the banks of the Nile. Face dull and streaming, he sat down at the river’s edge. Before him Ghezireh, the island of Bulak, seemed an immense vessel suddenly brought to in its course. It was a convoy of motionless palms under the refulgent sky. The stems of date palms, leaping like the bars of a grill above a grey vegetation, divided the isle throughout its length. Prickly-pear and banana-trees in tatters discoloured by the sand of the *khamsins*, a few acacias, made here and there a shady spot. Ghezireh slept inert in the torrid atmosphere. With a cry a hawk flew from a sycamore.

Beyond the island spread the low plains of Ghizeh. Hardened by the sun after the third harvest they had been invaded by the river’s flood. A vast lake had formed.

At first thick and yellow, it had slowly deposited its silt. Goha, shading his eyes with his hand, contemplated the iridescent and bluish sheet that extended as far as the plains of the desert. The silhouette of the Pyramids was reflected in it as in a mirror. A few shrubs with long hanging leaves, a few arecas emerged; whole villages were seized in the movement of waters that hampered at times the steps of the fellah, the horse, the camel on their homeward way. Beccaficos flew noiselessly.

A naked child about ten, carrying oars over his shoulder, passed Goha and leaped into a skiff. He was preparing to cast off when Goha called out :

"Hey ! Tell me, do you know Abd al-Akbar ? "

"Haj Abd al-Akbar," corrected the boy. "Yes, I know him. He's my father."

"Is he here ? "

"No, he crossed over. He's over there," answered the boy, pointing toward Ghezireh. "You wanted him ? "

"I wanted to go to the other side. Can you take me ? "

"The current is too strong for us, Sidi. The whirlpools go 'boo-loom, boo-loom,' and carry the skiff away. But if you want to cross I can call my older brother."

"Go and call him," ordered Goha.

The child landed, ran to the hamlet, and returned with his brother, a big boy who walked with a slouch. This one, without a word, motioned to Goha to enter the skiff, took the oars and cast off. They reached the far shore with difficulty. Goha thanked the rower, stretched himself on the bank and closed his eyes.

A noise in a near-by shrub attracted his attention. He turned his head and saw within reach of his fingers a pale green chameleon advance warily, then stop and crouch. It laid about forty eggs against a stone. Goha seized its foot. The beast made no resistance. Abandoning its body to the man it did not fear, it watched him with one eye,

while with the other it explored the air where gnats were flying. Goha pulled at its protruding eyelids. Irritated by this play, the creature puffed its throat and quickened its breath. Suddenly it showed alarm, broke away from Goha's hands and scrambled up a shrub. It was only then that Goha noticed the commotion that reigned in Ghezireh, the beating of wings, the rapid trotting, the shrill squawking, and that he heard the strident whistling that told him the reason for this feverish animation. A monitor, crawling on the bank, was warning beasts and man of the approach of a crocodile. Goha rose precipitately, glanced left and right, and descried a dark object descending the stream, like a tree-trunk floating adrift.

"Allah! Allah!" he cried, and lifting his caftan to free his legs, he rushed inland, running breathlessly, raising as he went flocks of wild ducks, ibis and sand-grouse that had cowered timorously in the bushes.

As he ran he emitted piercing yells, imitating the cry of the monitor, beating his hands, flinging pebbles before him, revelling in the disorder his passage created.

"Hey! Son of Mahmoud, hey! Is your house on fire?"

Goha had run into a lean old man who was resting at the foot of a tamarisk. He stopped, gasping, his face red, his eyes wide, his whole body expressing radiance, strength, youth.

"A crocodile, Abd al-Akbar! A crocodile!"

"Let it come, let it come," answered the old man, shaking his head. "Sit down and eat some dates."

He drew Goha to his side and continued:

"A crocodile. . . . I saw one the fifth day of the last moon. I had just caught a great big *bayad* . . . as big as yourself."

He paused to note the effect of his exploit, but Goha was not listening to him. Ears alert, nostrils quivering,

he was attentive to every noise, every movement in the island.

"Do you hear?" insisted the fisherman. "It was as big as a palm-tree."

And, as Goha did not answer, he advised him roughly to arrange his turban, that had come undone and was hanging on his shoulder, and to go and look for the babouche he must have lost in his race.

"I didn't lost it," retorted Goha, who, thinking he was being very witty, laughed gleefully. "The crocodile ate it up."

Unexpectedly the fisherman grew more sulky. He rose on his thin legs and moved away. Goha followed him. He found his babouche and fell into step with the fisherman, who now and then eyed him furtively. Abd al-Akbar was waiting for a word of encouragement to continue his story, while Goha greedily sniffed the aroma of the thickets. Emerging into a deeply excavated patch of ground he halted abruptly. Before him was the astonishing spectacle of men with shaven faces, wearing wigs, lace under the chin and short breeches. Brass buttons glittered all over their strange garments. What completed Goha's amusement was that in speaking they raised the voice without moving the arms.

"What is it? What is it, Abd al-Akbar?"

"Franks."

"Franks?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Oh!"

The Franks surrounded a recently exhumed statue of pink granite.

"Such an hypothesis," exclaimed one of them, "seems extravagant to me."

"But, sir, I have the authority of Herodotus."

"Oh, those historians, sir, those historians! Romancers."

"Pardon my insistence. . . . I maintain that there is a reproduction of Isis."

"Those savages over there who are watching us, they might enlighten us."

They greeted the sally with discreet laughter, then bent over the statue that was plaguing their brains and studied it gravely.

"And the woman . . . the woman there, who is she?" asked Goha.

"Do I know? They say it's a sheika, a sheika of stone."

"A sheika?"

"Yes."

"Oh!"

The Franks argued long. When their voices became animated, Goha longed to hit them little blows on the arms to make them sketch the appropriate gestures.

"Let us return, gentlemen," suddenly said the one of the four who spoke the most; "we will resume our work to-morrow."

"Hola! Vagabond! Felucca! Felucca! Felucca!"

Followed by the Franks, the fisherman started for the river bank. Goha remained alone, and his spirits fell. A causeless emotion took possession of his whole being. He rounded the statue and went and stretched himself out in the shade of a grey acacia, half of whose roots had been bared by the excavators. Lying and screening his eyes with his hands he could see a wide expanse of sky and the tops of the trees.

"Poor thing!" he murmured with a long sigh.

He often had these unexpected outbursts, that surprised even himself. He had scarcely said the words when, as if caught in a fault, he wondered for whom and why he had grieved. He lost himself in questioning whose only result was to sadden him.



He wanted to think of Hawa, of Sayed, of Mahmoud, of his mother. It was impossible. He could think of nothing but himself. The evoked images of the others lost themselves, too slight, too pale beside the augmenting thing that was himself.

The acacia that spread its branches over his head seemed an old-time friend. He had the clear feeling that by stretching out his arm he could touch the peak of the date palm that stood a hundred feet away. The thing seemed to him so natural that he felt no need of trying it.

Besides, his legs, his arms, his head refused to make the slightest movement. And as his torpor gained on him, the landscape was transformed before his eyes, and new affinities appeared between the world and himself. It seemed to him that the acacia resembled him. The date palms and the tamarisks, the stone that lay at his foot and that he did not see, resembled him too. All that was motionless resembled him. . . . Birds glided by in silent flight, men walked on the other side of the river. . . . And these, on the other hand, differed from him. . . .

Immobility had become for him the necessary attitude of life. The birds, the men, were only shadows, fleeting things. . . .

To himself Goha was no longer anything but a spectacle. Goha saw himself. He saw a tree, he saw a mound of grey earth, he saw the sky ; but the tree, the sky, the mound did not limit his vision. It extended through them, for these objects were no longer outside him, they were within him, they were the visible aspects of his soul. Through them he discerned the rest of himself, invisible, infinite.

At twilight Abd al-Akbar, alarmed not to have seen Goha return, took his oars and crossed the river. He was tired, and during the crossing he unceasingly complained crustily : " Haj Mahmoud has had no luck with his son. . . . That boy would be capable of spending the night on



Ghezireh. Supposing I didn't go after him, no one would think of him. . . . It would serve him right. . . .” Nevertheless he rowed with all his strength, for, in spite of his grim face and hard speech, Haj Abd al-Akbar had a good heart.

Landing, he went straight to the spot where he had left Goha, near the statue. As the darkness had thickened he did not see him, and he began to call, “Goha ! Goha !” At once a voice answered :

“What do you want ?”

“What do I want ? . . . I want to take you back.”

This time Abd al-Akbar received no answer. He began to call again, “Goha ! Goha !” but Goha gave no more sign of life.

“I'm pretty good,” exclaimed the fisherman, “to think of an idiot like you ! You won't talk to me ? Well then, stay ! You can die of hunger and thirst if you like. As for me, I'm going. . . .”

He moved resolutely away, but after a few steps he hesitated to make good his threat. He told himself that Goha was crazy and that his duty was to track him down and bring him back. He went in the direction indicated by the voice and soon discovered the son of Mahmoud at the foot of the acacia, stretched on his back, eyes wide open. He bent over and shook him. Goha turned on his side and smiled vaguely at Abd al-Akbar.

“What's the matter ?” asked the latter, not without some anxiety.

Goha, penetrated by the dampness of the hour, shivered, then he yawned and stretched. The change in the state of his soul had been abrupt ; it seemed to him he had been sleeping and had just awakened.

At last he followed the fisherman into his skiff. During the crossing they exchanged few words.

Goha entered the city. From deserted quarters he

passed to populous ones. Soon he was skirting the shops, the houses, the mosques familiar from childhood ; on all sides he saw indifferent or hostile faces spring up. He felt betrayed and uneasy. At the corner of a street some workmen, squatting in a circle, called to him.

"Come and tell us if what he's telling us is true," called one.

Ambar, the mason, who was thus called into question, added :

"I was just telling them the story of the kettle."

But Goha only saluted from a distance. The workmen threw stones at him, then the circle closed in again.

"You were telling us that on the eve of Shama al-Nassim Goha needed a kettle. . . ."

"He needed a kettle," said Ambar, "and he went to borrow one from his neighbour, Abd Allah."

"Abd Allah ! I know him," interrupted one of the workmen. "He deals in sheep hides."

"His shop is near the Hassan mosque."

"Why, yes. He's got only one eye."

"And his moustache ! Ha ! Ha ! His moustache . . . ten hairs to the east, ten to the west. Go on, Ambar."

"He borrows the kettle and comes back three days later. 'Neighbour, I've got news,' he says, knocking on Abd Allah's door, 'good news !' 'What is it ?' the other asks, pulling the bolts. 'Good news, neighbour. Your kettle has just given birth.'"

"God chop you to pieces, Ambar ; you're the funniest man in the world !"

The mason, who had laughed harder than the others, continued, his eyes shining with malice and his arms waving :

"Abd Allah knows Goha's silliness and smells a good laugh. He sighs and strikes his breast. 'Ah, my poor kettle. How it must have suffered ! But are you sure,

Goha ? ' ' Am I sure ? You lent it me empty, and this morning I found it loaded with three little kettles. Everything in this world is a matter of fate—your kettle has had little ones. . . . ' "

" God exterminate you, Ambar ! Your story is funny ! "

" Goha wanted to get even," continued the mason. " Some time later he asks his neighbour for another kettle. It was to cook a sheep. Abd Allah makes haste to oblige him. ' This one is five times as big as the first,' he says. ' We'll see how many little ones it has.' After a long absence Goha returns empty-handed and with a long face. Abd Allah asks him anxiously, ' What is it, brother ? Speak ! What is it ? ' ' Alas ! ' says Goha, ' your kettle is dead.' ' Dead ! you say ? You're joking ! ' ' Alas ! ' says Goha again, ' everything in this world is a matter of fate—your first kettle had little ones, the second has just died.' "

A legend was growing up around the son of Mahmoud. Finding in him the perfect type of the fable the storytellers discarded their imaginary heroes. In each tale they invented they put Goha's name. The list of his exploits and his fame grew as fast as the keen wits of the city produced their works. One made him out cunning, another doltish, another mischievous, another pathetic. His domestic misadventures were told in detail, his wives and children were described. In sum, following the requirements of the tale, Goha was by turns a youth or an old man. Some even had him dead.

Regularly every morning Goha left the house. He lost himself in the labyrinth of lanes, crossings, cemeteries. Abruptly, at the corner of a building, he would emerge into a plain of sand or a field. If he was tired he stopped and lay down until evening in passionate contemplation ; if not, he went on, to the banks of the Nile, to Ghezireh.

He returned to Cairo with eyes dazzled by the sun. As

he went by shops and passers-by the timid and awkward man revived in him. He had to look out for the hazards of the streets, think of his house, answer the questions put to him and defend himself against people's sarcasm.

Alertness, restraint, reflection became necessary. He knew this, yet he brought into the city the simplicity of Ghezireh. Unfitted for society he was its victim, and, covered with ridicule, he secluded himself to view the results of his blunders. But his meditations were in vain ; life among men remained mysterious. Astounded by the consequences of his acts, unable to recognise the hands that had cleverly transformed them, he believed unknown monsters to be at work. Fortified by these fatalistic solutions he advanced blindly toward new disasters, planting in his neighbour's mind the idea of his folly.

## V

### THE BRIDAL PROCESSION

A MONTH had passed since Sheik al-Zaki had confided his mental sufferings to Waddah Alysum. The professor of al-Azar had not yet altered his way of living. He attended his courses regularly, discoursed with his colleagues, and pursued his labours. His teaching, however, had lost its vigour. His voice had no longer the ardent tones that intimidated his opponents and won over the hesitant. He fell into long silences, his eyes dull, his arms crossed over his knees, and took up mechanically the interrupted sentence when the discreet murmurs of his pupils penetrated his torpor.

He had thought it would be easy to break with the past and give himself up to life, simply, to taste a care-free happiness, as did his Egyptian brothers. But long habits of austerity forbade him this natural expansion.

A few unattractive women vegetated in his harem : Mabrouka, his wife for twenty years, and some slaves whose virginity he had disdained. He decided one night to approach these last. By his order Ibrahim the eunuch brought them to the library, where it was his custom to stay. He saw them advance hesitantly. Their master's whim terrified them. For years they had feverishly waited to immolate themselves in his arms ; and when they saw their breasts lengthen and their waists thicken, enervated by abstinence and despairing of ever being taken, they had given themselves to workmen of the neighbourhood. Sheik al-Zaki calmly studied their grimacing faces, without a suspicion of their anxiety. He found them ugly and vulgar, and dismissed them with a wave of the hand.

Beautiful Syrians were offered in the market-place ; he went there at once. Nude girls were displayed on carpets of Smyrna. Sheik al-Zaki bargained indifferently over a few. A child with slender legs and broad hips attracted his attention. At a sign from the dealer she took lascivious poses. The philosopher, who had caught this by-play, turned away his head and left. In the presence of these creatures, trained for the single purpose of pleasing the senses of men, he realised that what he sought in love was not the gross assuagement of desire.

"Mabrouka, my dear," he said to his wife, "I have decided to remarry."

"You are right," she answered docilely.

"I have heard tell of a daughter of Abd al-Rahman. She is called Nour al-Ein. They say she is all right."

"As you will, Sidi. If you command it I'll go and see her."

Next day, riding a donkey and followed by three slaves, she went to Abd al-Rahman's. He lived on a run-down estate on the banks of the Nile. Mabrouka returned quite late and with a solemn air gave her husband an account of her impressions.

"You can marry her," she told him, "but, by Allah, I don't know what to tell you."

Filled with the gravity of her rôle she had comfortably installed herself on a divan and begun to stuff tobacco into an ebony chibouk encrusted with silver. It was a costly gift from al-Zaki to console her for the loss of the only son she had had.

"Isn't she pretty ? " asked the sheik.

"Do as you please, Sidi. . . ."

"But your opinion ? "

"My opinion ? I have only one opinion. . . . The girl—you can marry her."

"Well, you've seen Nour al-Ein, you know what she is like. . . ."



"And who told you she wasn't pretty?" protested the woman, hand on her breast.

The sheik kept his patience. He was accustomed to these preliminaries, which undoubtedly masked a definite idea. He patted his wife with his hand.

"Come, my dear, come. Tell me what you think of her."

"What does it matter what I think? Are you not the master? Are you not the one who decides, not only in this, but in everything?"

By her malicious look Sheik al-Zaki understood that she was on the point of giving in, and he pressed her further.

"Speak, my dear, speak."

"I'll tell you one thing," she murmured, placing the bowl of her chibouk on the carpet. "She is old."

"Old?"

"She is old."

Al-Zaki asked for an explanation. At first she refused to give any.

"You know what I saw, now. . . . Do as you please," she invariably answered.

"Old? But how old?"

"Seventeen."

The sheik had moved to the window. Forehead against the pane, he reflected on the inconvenience of being united to a girl so near to fading.

"Yes . . ." he said, turning to Mabrouka. "Seventeen . . . that's a lot. . . . I understand why you hesitated."

"Well, then, why take another? In three years she'll be like me."

Al-Zaki smiled slightly. To this woman, spread in a heap on the divan and absorbed in her chibouk, he contrasted a firm-bodied virgin who would lay hold on life with eager heart. It was known in Cairo, through

indiscretions, that Nour al-Ein was a beautiful girl and that her father had refused many suitors, reserving her for a man famous for his learning and wealth.

"My dear," said al-Zaki, "I think I'll marry the daughter of Abd al-Rahman despite her age."

Mabrouka was cornered and she advanced her last argument.

"Listen," she said. "I love you, Sidi, and I don't want your harem to give you trouble. Choose a wife twelve or thirteen years old. I'll bring her up like my own daughter. I'll care for her, I'll dress her; she'll be obedient to you and to me. Your second wife must respect me. . . . If not, I can't be happy. . . . Words lead to arguments, arguments lead to quarrels. . . . Man needs to be calm."

Sheik al-Zaki, who had seated himself beside her, put his arm around her waist and reassured her affectionately. He promised to protect her welfare, and offered as the price of her consent a large emerald set in a ring of gold filigree, which he drew from his finger.

One morning the tapestry-makers invaded Sheik al-Zaki's house. Grinding carts, drawn by buffaloes, choked the narrow street. With a sharp movement of the back, porters unloaded mattresses, cushions, draperies. The fall of a ladder startled Goha from his sleep.

He was about to doze off again when a ray of sunlight filtering through the badly fitted persiennes played on his face. He tried to remove it with his hand. Grumbling, he repeated the gesture. He sat up at last, his eyes swollen with sleep.

"What next?" he called.

The bustle increased outside. The workmen were raising immense hangings around Sheik al-Zaki's garden. With drawling voice they chanted an invocation to God, less to beg for strength than to cadence their movements.

At times a burst of laughter, followed by curses, interrupted the work. Muscles relaxed, but it sufficed for a passer-by to take up the litany to make the men return to their labours, carried along by the obsessing rhythm, more imperious than a command.

Goha half-opened the casement and put out his head.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Sheik al-Zaki is marrying to-day," answered a sharp-featured workman.

But everywhere rose a shout, "Goha! Goha!" and quips greeted his appearance.

The three wives of Haj Mahmoud had decided to go, accompanied by Hawa and their daughters, to the house of a friend, a neighbour of Abd al-Rahman, to take part in forming the bridal procession. At the moment of leaving it was found the door could not be locked, the key would not work, and there was no time to get a locksmith. Arrayed in their finest the family lamented.

"I'll stay at home," said Zeinab sulkily.

"We'll all stay at home," answered Hellal and Nassim.

"And why, madam?" protested Hawa.

"You want my casket stolen, ingrate?" groaned Zeinab. "You want my jewels taken?"

Mahmoud was about to propose that she take them along when he saw that she already had a band and a necklace about the neck, a dozen or more rings on her fingers, bracelets the length of her forearms and brooches over her breasts.

"What's left in the casket?" he asked.

"My necklace of sixteen pearls, three brooches, twenty bracelets, my gold-embroidered veils, my cashmeres. . . . No, no! You go; I'll stay."

"Your words are as insipid as spittle!" exclaimed Mahmoud, losing his patience.

Hawa patted her master on the back to calm his anger.

Still the children cried, the women fretted and the efforts of the negress seemed in vain, when her eyes fell upon Goha, who alone remained impassive.

"Let Goha guard the house!" she exclaimed.

This proposal, conciliating everybody's interest, was greeted with enthusiasm. Zeinab, reassured, gave pressing instructions.

"My son," she said, "take care of the casket. I entrust it to you."

And Mahmoud emphasised:

"It contains precious things."

"We are late," squealed Hawa. "We'll never get there."

"Let us go," said Mahmoud, "and you stay, son."

Goha did not complain of this unfair treatment. It would have mattered little to him if he had had to stay till the next day. The hours flowed by without leaving him any memory of their length.

Time passes. Goha is told: "Our time will come," and he finds nothing alarming in the ever-blue sky, and he sees nothing coming. Men whom he questions bring him before a watch: "See, when that little hand has gone all around the dial a day has gone." Goha says: "Is that time, then, and what does it do to me? The hand turns without touching me. It doesn't matter to me any more than a cart wheel turning." They tell him: "At each turn of the wheel, at each word you speak, time passes." "And what if I say nothing?" "Time would pass just the same." "For others, but not for me!" "For you and the others." "And if I go to sleep in the desert?" "Time would pass, because your heart would still beat in your chest." "And if I stopped my heart?" "You would stop time. . . ."

It took the grave voice of al-Zaki to rouse Goha from his torpor.

“How is it, my son, that you are staying here instead of escorting the bride?”

Deeply impressed by the eminent scholar's reproach, without a word, without even arranging his turban, Goha rushed into the street. Then his parents' injunction returned to his mind. He re-entered the house and, to reconcile Sheik al-Zaki's desire and Mahmoud's command, he double-locked the brass-bound casket and carried away the key.

Goha hastened to the house of Abd al-Rahman, the bride's father. The noonday sun fell on the city like molten metal. Now and then one could see a fellah stretched at the foot of a wall, face covered, legs bare. Less frequently a woman, drawn up in the dark folds of a *mellaia*, rested, looking like an immense charred fowl. A human shadow, drowned in light, disappeared silently through a doorway. All that lived seemed in revolt; all that moved away seemed to disappear for ever.

The train of fire settles over the city; the houses cease to breathe; not a movement in all nature. . . . Cairo with its thousands of white buildings, its ruins, its graveyards, its innumerable domes, its flaming minarets, is touched with death and eternity; the burning moment has fused over it.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a noise envelops you. . . . It is like a far-off thing, the confused rumour of spaces. Greater than the whole silence, it plunges the mind into a mournful mood. You turn to look and it is a small uncertain point, vibrating, furrowing space. In this mysterious particle is embodied the last energy of scattered lives; in it is concentrated all the movement of the universe. You look closer and—sublime immensity of little things, presence of the all in a minute body—powerful emotion has taken possession of your heart through the buzzing of a flying insect.



Goha had gone to sleep in the shade of a wall. He was still sleeping when the nuptial caravan appeared. Heading the procession, in a cart, musicians clashed cymbals or shook tambourines with their tinted hands. Camels covered with bells carried the women. In the centre two white dromedaries, adorned with mirrors and sparkling collars, their noses pierced with coral rings, swung a vast palanquin entirely covered with luxurious stuffs. On the cushions at the bottom Nour al-Ein, lonely queen of the cortege, draped in a heavy gold-woven veil, bent her head.

Jugglers and acrobats amused the folk with their tricks. At intervals from a women's chorus rose the *zalgouta*, that half-strident, half-tremulous cry that simulates a frenzied ringing of bells, and goes to die on the threshold of the seventh heaven.

A vigorous stroke from a slipper projected Goha's consciousness into joyful reality. He found himself in a compact crowd composed entirely of men. Rich landowners, merchants, workmen, friends of Abd al-Rahman or in his service, walked shoulder to shoulder, without any distinction of rank. One group held itself apart—they were students of al-Azar whom their comrades had delegated to express to al-Zaki the share they had in his happiness. The crowd looked on them with respectful goodwill, for it had recognised in these soberly moving young men who spoke to each other in low voices the religious élite of Moslem youth.

When night came Sheik al-Zaki's garden was a gala scene. Negroes carrying torches and ladders threaded a difficult way through the crowded guests squatting on mats. One by one the coloured lanterns hanging in garlands from the awnings were lit, while the acclamations of the onlookers resounded in the incense-laden air.

"This way, Mahommed, this way. . . . Three of them are out."



The slave thus addressed came forward and raised his torch, but so awkwardly that the oil from the lamp spilled on him. Ashamed of his bungling, and embarrassed by the laughter that rose on all sides, he retired precipitately.

Eunuchs were posted around Sheik al-Zaki's house. Behind the lattice the crowding women looked eagerly down into the garden. Nour al-Ein, freed at last of her veils, bare of throat, her face ugly with paint, her eyelids closed, drooped her jewel-laden arms. She carried, stuck in her bodice, the traditional little golden arrow that was a symbol of the conjugal rite to which she was about to submit. She awaited with equal indifference the brutal gesture of her husband and his first embrace, and responded with a fixed smile to the obscene comments the women whispered in her ear. For the ten hours the ceremony had lasted she had abstained from every effort, from collecting her thoughts, from questioning herself. She experienced a sort of luxury in feeling herself the plaything of a destiny against which it would have been vain to struggle. She had conformed without repugnance to the will of her father, who was uniting her to a man of whose very existence she had been ignorant until then. She had given herself into the hands of the slaves for all the preparations that precede the bridal night. Others had decided for her, and, in order that the sense of her impotence might be complete, she had exaggerated her self-abandonment to the point of no longer willing where her will might have found expression. In the bath she allowed herself to be depilated by expert hands without showing her impatience by more than an imperceptible tightening of the lips. Her body had been perfumed, her eyebrows joined by a thick black stroke; she had been clothed in damasks and heavy veils that impeded her movements. She had traversed Cairo, dazed by the heat, almost dozing. She had been advised to be friendly to Mabrouka, whom she

supplanted in Sheik al-Zaki's heart. She had kissed his fingers with teeth set, an evil light in her eyes. Soon she was to offer to the dried-up bony hand of the man she had glimpsed through the lattice the formal proof of her virginity, and since custom demanded that she cry out, she had decided to cry out, no matter how slight the pain. Nevertheless under her mask of indifference lurked a latent hostility, ready to flash out at the opportune moment. Far from sacrificing herself to an imperious code she withdrew within herself. The day would come when she would have to struggle against a master. Until then her part was to say nothing, to refuse as a weakness all gratification in the luxury displayed to intoxicate and enslave her. And none could see through the woman's indifference her terribly clear calculation.

"Lift your eyelids; show us your moon-eyes," simpered Zeinab.

She had coveted the rare privilege of sitting beside the bride. She had attained it at the cost of a thousand stratagems, and with honeyed words she sought to show herself worthy of the place she had won :

"It isn't your pretty breasts you should look at, but over there," leaning over Nour al-Ein, "over there, where you can see the venerable sheik, your husband, your lord."

"How handsome he is!" said Nour al-Ein mechanically. "Allah preserve him for me!"

"See," continued Zeinab proudly, "your husband is talking to Haj Mahmoud, mine."

Slightly raising the screen, in contempt of convention, she tried to direct the preoccupied eye of Nour al-Ein toward Sheik al-Zaki. A eunuch advanced and stung Zeinab's shoulders with a thin switch.

"Put that down!" he cried.

She covered her face and ran away into the vestibule,

where the guests' children were assembled. Exhausted by their noisy play they had dropped on the mats, girls and boys together. Against the walls a few nurses with babies in their arms rocked their heads and crooned native plaints. Goha's sisters, who had distinguished themselves by their over-excitement and their greediness, slept interlaced under guard of the eldest, who crouched beside them and was herself falling a prey to sleep.

Loud shouts greeted the *almehs*. While the negroes continued to move about with cups of cinnamon and cakes stuffed with dates, they took their places on the narrow carpet spread in advance in the centre of the garden.

At the first notes of the lute the dancers placed themselves at equal distances. Gold-woven veils floated over their bare legs. With a sudden movement they uncovered their bellies and, throwing back their heads, held out to the men their brown and shining flesh.

"Come on, Goha," said Alysum, "choose. Which one do you want?"

"All of them!" answered Goha. "All of them!"

He had seated himself by Waddah Alysum and his two friends. The richness of their garments attracted the attention of the crowd, their haughty attitude commanded respect. So Goha felt a complex emotion, in which was blended fear and vanity, when Waddah Alysum caught sight of him quietly sucking at an orange and had him called to him. He accepted the invitation just as he submitted to a command, and he was very much surprised by the magnificent welcome accorded him. His astonishment was only momentary. Unable to discern the irony in the emphatic discourses the young men addressed to him, he was not long in considering himself quite naturally their equal. Mokawa Kendi and Akr Zaid Tai, so as not to spoil their friend's sport, and also finding the game amusing, bustled around Goha, stuffed him

with confections and overwhelmed him with flattery. The son of Haj Mahmoud Riazzy felt an ineffable ease. Never with Hawa, never even with animals had he felt so master of himself. For the first time he was in harmony with men; he could abandon himself to them without reserve. No caution, no constraint was needed. He answered spontaneously all the questions put to him, laughing with those he made laugh, as though he fathomed by after-thought the drollery of his words. Sure of himself, he did not hesitate to interrupt his elegant companions to speak the thought that at times a word, the only one he had understood in a sentence, suggested to him.

"Let us suppose," said Alysum, "that a Bedouin woman, riding a camel, is halted on her way by a bridge that is too low for her head. . . . What should she do?"

"Tear down the bridge," gravely formulated Mokawa Kendi.

"Cut the camel's legs off," answered Akr Zaid Tai in the same tone.

"Why? Why?" protested Goha. "All she had to do is to lower her head!"

At these words the young men threw themselves on Goha. They kissed his cheeks, they embraced him violently.

"Oh, flower of intelligence! You, the greatest among us!"

Goha took the hands proffered him and, his throat constrained with emotion, could only repeat:

"She had only to lower her head. . . ."

"Come, Mahommed!" called Alysum, addressing a slave. "The son of Haj Mahmoud has spoken! He is dying of thirst! Bring the syrups!"

Goha resisted these delicate attentions, assuring his friends that he was neither thirsty nor hungry. But he had to stop, for Mokawa Kendi stuffed the mouthpiece

of a chibouk into his mouth with a courteous, "Deign to honour us."

"Smoke to please me," begged Akr Zaid Tai.

And Waddah Alysum added :

"The smoke will intoxicate you and golden words will fall from your lips."

Having simulated the final spasm the *almehs* disappeared. Suddenly, from a window, came piercing screams, and an old man appeared at the door of the house, his ashen and wasted face alight with a childish smile. It was Abd al-Rahman. Slowly he descended the steps and crossed the garden, his arms aloft, waving triumphantly above the crowd, like a banner, the traditional napkin. Then in the desert shots resounded. The Bedouins were giving themselves to a nocturnal fantasia in honour of Nour al-Ein.

## VI

### THE JASMINE AND THE SCARAB

THE revel had lasted far into the night. After many amenities Goha broke away from the three young men. He was drunk with joy and weariness. In his ears buzzed the flatteries of Alysum, and laughter seemed to have become fixed in his eyes and in the corners of his mouth. He turned for one last look at Sheik al-Zaki's garden, then regretfully crossed the threshold of his home. Hawa slept in the vestibule. He advanced silently and gropingly found his room, so full of noisy gaiety that he feared to disturb, even by his presence, the family's rest. By the gleam of a night-light he undressed absent-mindedly, while the various episodes of the fête rose before him. He sat on a divan stubbornly considering his red babouche, and seemed to see, on the bent-up point, his memories file by one by one. . . . Here are the dancers, with their bellies moist with sweat. On a rostrum a singer, eyes half-closed, lips tight, remains insensible to the entreaties of his audience. He will sing only when in *kef*, and Sheik al-Zaki is offering him narcotic drinks. . . . Goha remains motionless, shoulders bent. Near him the night-light flares fitfully and mosquitoes, with their thin music, seem to perforate the silence. He feels a profound weariness of the body, the peaceful array of the room invites him to sleep, and yet, without knowing why, he prolongs his vigil. A great ball weighs at the bottom of his chest and instinctively he puts a hand to it. Again he sees Alysum and his two friends. What a caress in their eyes and how beautiful their mouths ! As this image becomes clear the ball lightens at the bottom of his chest. Akr



Zaid Tai speaks to him affectionately and Mokawa Kendi clasps him in his arms. The idea that it might be a joke at his expense does not come near him. The young men's ridicule is too cleverly veiled. Goha feels a very tender emotion invade him. With the sentiment that has just blossomed within him he becomes aware of a whole new world. He has lived among men, cut off from their intimate life, having toward them only fear or gratitude according to whether they ill-treated or took pity on him. When they relegated him to an inferior place they seemed to him of nature not superior, but merely different. . . .

Until now he has misunderstood men. For the first time he enters into intimate contact with them. As the words of Mokawa Kendi hum in his ears his heart fills with an inexhaustible tenderness that spreads over all his memories, all his past. . . . The beings he has met in the chance encounters of his life will want to witness his joy. To-morrow he will go out at dawn, he will meet them in the streets and will speak cordial words to them. He will put his arm around the fried-food seller and the water-carrier, he will buy oranges from Sayed, who, despite his fearsome black moustache, is an excellent fellow, and who, if he kicks you in the back, does it in friendship. Sounding his memory Goha decides that the inhabitants of Cairo have always received him with extraordinary goodwill. . . . He does not think, however, of taking advantage of so much kindness, although he is certain that all his requests would be granted. On the contrary it is he, he who will give at the slightest appeal. He will give to his friends, to Waddah Alysum, to Sayed, to Abd Allah his neighbour, he will give ; for there is no one in the city who is excluded from his immense sympathy, even to the most obscure passer-by ; the babouches on his feet, the turban on his head, his bed, his father's house, his mother's jewels . . . and he will be happy.

A light snoring made him start. He thought his nurse was calling him.

"I am coming," he murmured, "I am coming."

Feverishly he started toward the house. He glimpsed an arm, a foot. . . . He brought his hand down on his nurse's neck. In the darkness he could not distinguish his own colour from that of the negress.

"Well!" he exclaimed, in a burst of tenderness, "Hawa becomes white at night."

Seated beside the sleeper he began to caress her, and as Hawa's snores changed to the purring of an amorous cat, Goha, busy at his labour of soothing, redoubled his caresses. In his ardour he grew audacious and Hawa awoke.

"What do you want?" she asked languorously.

Goha answered tenderly:

"You are the most beautiful jasmine of spring."

She thought he was making fun of her.

"In the darkness the jasmine and the scarab look alike."

"I am the scarab and you are the jasmine," continued Goha.

Hawa repulsed him gently.

"Go away, Goha; go away, or I'll tell your father."

But Goha, sure of mystifying her, swelled his voice and answered:

"Hush! I am my father."

On the mat of straw they rested in each other's arms. Hawa, who had taken off the *mandil* that covered her hair, slumbered, groaning at intervals, while Goha, his nose buried in the negress's bosom, reflected on the events of the night. He loved this ample and soft breast that had nourished him in childhood and now offered itself to his kisses.

As he meditated he amused himself by pulling at the little braids that adorned Hawa's head. He counted thirty of them.

"Hawa," he said at last, "Hawa, won't you talk a little?"

"I am dead, my child," the negress coquetted.

Although for twenty-five years she had surrounded Goha with an altogether maternal affection, she assumed her new rôle with ease. A single embrace had sufficed to demolish her nurse's past and to make her spontaneously a lover. So at Goha's call she responded playfully, imagining exigencies to which she was eager to submit. But, knowing the art of seduction, she repeated with feminine modesty :

"I am dead, darling, I am dead."

Goha did not fulfil her expectation. He returned to pulling at her braids, seeing no more again in this woman, whose powerful caresses had exhausted him, but the prudent adviser who so often had come to his aid in life. This familiar gesture saddened the negress, taking her back to a past she had thought closed for ever.

Confused thoughts assailed Goha. He retained only a vague memory of the emotions he had felt before he had joined Hawa. His love for humanity had exhausted itself in his nurse's arms and he was now witnessing its slow revival.

"Hawa," he said at last, "I love you."

"Yes, darling," answered the negress, pressing herself to him.

"No," rejoined Goha, moving away a little, "I love you as I love Waddah Alysum, as I love Sheik al-Zaki, as I love Sayed, the orange-seller."

"Then you don't love me at all," exclaimed the negress, sobbing.

Goha sought in vain for comforting words. But the negress calmed herself all at once. After a short pause she asked curiously :

"Who is this Sayed?"

"He's the orange-seller," answered Goha.

"The one who is big and strong and wears a big moustache?"

"Yes, the orange-seller."

"Ah, what a man!" answered the negress in a sensuous voice.

And Goha, who did not know jealousy, repeated:

"Ah, what a man!"

Hawa prepared to return to sleep, but Goha would not let her. He insisted on confiding to her a resolution he had made during the evening.

"Listen, Hawa; I'm going to marry the daughter of Sheik al-Balad."

"What did you say, darling?"

"Alysum told me: 'You can marry the daughter of Sheik al-Balad.'"

"May Allah grant it!" repeated the negress. "Everything is possible. Allah is great!"

Both remained silent, Goha meditating on his coming wedding, and Hawa on the children he would have after his marriage and that she would carry against her breast, in the very place where she had held their father.

"Dearie," she said, "yesterday I had a dream. . . . There was a big ladder, big . . . big . . . and you were climbing the ladder. . . . It's a good omen."

"It's a good omen," affirmed Goha.

He thought of the splendid feast he would offer the inhabitants of Cairo on the day of the happy event. He would have *almehs* come, the most beautiful in the country; he would have thousands of lanterns hung around many-coloured awnings; he would have all the heifers and all the sheep in the world slaughtered, and he would gorge his guests with boiled eggs, with beans, with cucumbers and botargo.

"Darling," Hawa resumed, "if you follow my advice you can marry even the Sultan's daughter. . . . Only you must be good and read your Koran . . . attend to your father's business, seek out the company of mature men,

of sheiks, like our neighbour, for instance, and if, with all that, you love me well, He who is on high will grant you everything you desire."

But Goha was not listening. He was thinking of the gifts he would make his friends to interest them in his happiness. To Sayed he would give a new basket, for his old one was broken in several places and his oranges rolled in the mud. He would also give him silks to replace his tunic of blue cotton stuff that, torn at the bottom, left his legs bare to the knee.

"To you, Hawa . . ." he exclaimed.

The negress interrupted him, alarmed.

"Not so loud, darling, not so loud! We might be heard!"

"I'll give you," Goha continued, "*mandils* and cashmere shawls enough to cover this whole room, and then I'll give you rings for the ten fingers of your hands and for your toes, and then I'll give you a necklace that will go twenty times around your neck. . . ."

"Oh, Sidi!" exclaimed Hawa. "I was right when I said you are good, that you are generous! . . . You will wed the daughter of Sheik al-Balad, and you're worth her head!"

Being not without some sense, she had at once understood that her master's project was unattainable, but the lure of the wealth that Goha made her glimpse aroused her greed and biased her good judgment. More even than the thought of possessing sumptuous apparel, the certainty that her treasures would not fail to arouse a hateful jealousy among the negresses of the neighbourhood filled her with an unwholesome and deep intoxication. Ah! How she would avenge herself on Fatima, Abd Allah's slave, who, the night before, at the wedding, proudly wore a new gallabiah.

"And you'll give me a gallabiah," she said to Goha in a



soft, ingratiating voice, "a more beautiful gallabiah than Fatima's. . . ."

"I'll give you fifty gallabiahs," answered Goha.

At that the negress could no longer contain her joy. She sat up and, addressing in the darkness an imaginary person, she cried, her fist extended :

"We'll see, we'll see which of us is the prouder to-morrow !"

She struck her breast and, still in the same position, continued with overflowing emotion :

"There's not another man like Goha ! I swear it on both his eyes ! He succeeds in everything he undertakes. Because he never says : 'Hawa, go and get me the water pitcher ; Hawa, go and get me this, go and get me that. . . .' Does anyone want to know him ? I'll give him my opinion. Was I not his nurse ? Did he not drink my milk for six years ?"

Goha thought of the palace in which he would shelter his household. He chose for a site the border of the Khalig river, and decided to have a high balustrade built round the terrace so that the children to be born to him shouldn't fall into the river. The slave interrupted his reflections.

"You must hurry, darling. . . . If you want to marry, marry as soon as possible."

"Just leave it to me," said Goha, with a bored air ; "in a week it will all be over. I have already given my consent. Then, you understand, the thing is half done. . . ."

The first gleams of dawn penetrated the vestibule. While Goha perceived that Hawa was black as usual, Hawa, disillusioned by her young master's details, was thinking that she would have to submit to the end of her life to Fatima's scornful smile. A cobweb hanging from the ceiling made her think of her domestic duties, and suddenly she became conscious of the danger threatening her romance.

"Go away !" she breathed in her lover's ear, "go



away ! Haj Mahmoud might catch us. Allah ! Allah ! If only he hasn't heard us ! ”

A few hours later Haj Mahmoud's wives and daughters had gathered around a vast receptacle, and each dipped her corn cake into the tomato salad. Mahmoud, who, with his son, ate beans, having finished his meal, rinsed his mouth, obtained silence with a sign, and spoke :

“Goha,” he said in a hard voice, “yesterday you disobeyed us. You were told to stay at home and you went out. I might have expected it.”

He fixed on his son a look full of reproach and continued :

“That isn't all. I watched you in Sheik al-Zaki's garden ; you were the laughing-stock of everyone. Waddah Alysum and his friends made fun of you as they would a clown. You are my son, do you hear ? And your shame rebounds on me.”

He stopped again, overcome with emotion. Leaning toward Goha he added :

“My son, you have in a small way the brain of a donkey, and everybody knows it. If you are struck, if you are spoken to, if you are embraced even, know that you are being made fun of. . . . As long as you live, Goha, you will be made fun of.”

Docilely Goha let himself be convinced, and that is how he abandoned his humanitarian dreams. The men toward whom he had his burst of tenderness resumed their grim and contemptuous appearance. On his part he regained his happy indifference.

His days flowed by in peace. He shared in his sisters' play and loitered around Cairo. Shrinking from every enterprise, his only exercise of initiative was in the choice of his walks. He spent his energy without tiring himself, and, despite Hawa's violent passion, the harmony of his nature and of his existence was not troubled.

## PART TWO: GOHA'S LOVES



## VII

### GOHA'S CONFESSION

ONE morning of the month of Muharrem, 1144th of the Hegira, Sheik al-Zaki, astride a donkey, was on his way to the university. Aroused by the cold, the little animal trotted briskly and gaily clinked the bits of silver hanging from its neck. His head covered with wool, Sheik al-Zaki mused on the ceaseless strife of the mamelukes, that was exhausting Egypt. The night before a rumour had spread in the city that Ali Bey, the ancient Sheik al-Balad, exiled for nearly a year in the province of Said, had returned and again put himself in power. The street was calm. People stood in doorways quietly discussing the *coup d'état*. Sayed the orange-seller, admirer of the strong, in the centre of a group, was trying in vain to stir his listeners' indifference.

"Four beys killed this night, four driven out, the Pasha of Stamboul removed . . . Ali Bey isn't like the others . . . he's a real chief."

Farther along some Jews, with long curly hair over their ears, were saying to a roaster, who turned his spit and nodded his head in astonishment :

"He was our slave twenty-seven years ago. We were customs collectors and we had him brought from the Caucasus. . . . Ah ! God is great ! God is great ! Look what he has become !"

The sight of these impassive folk saddened Sheik al-Zaki. "Long centuries of servitude have broken all their spirit !" he thought.

At this moment he saw to his right the venerable mosque of Hassanein. Rare slabs of tile remained embedded

along the walls, vestiges of a former splendour. The minaret was falling into ruins. Sheik al-Zaki thought : "Incurable misery everywhere. . . . Having subdued the fellah, now it is mounting to attack these holy retreats. . . ." A magnificent sun drenched him and his donkey. After his lecture he would find in his palace a woman who was his, surrounded with luxuries that were his, he reflected, and he realised he had exaggerated the misery of life.

He was interrupted in his reflections by a call several times repeated :

"Sheik ! . . . Sheik ! . . ."

He stopped his mount. Goha was following him, all out of breath. He had decided, at the importunities of his nurse, to mingle with the prominent men of the city and so enhance his social position.

"Didn't you hear me ? " he asked Sheik al-Zaki.

"No, my son. . . . May your day be blessed."

"I am Goha."

"I know you already . . . may your name live among names."

"All the way from the house I ran after your donkey. . . . My father says you are wise and Hawa says it too and Zeinab says it too and Hellal says it too and . . ."

The sheik interrupted with a kindly gesture.

"So you must advise me," continued Goha. "Me, I've become proverbial . . ."

"Proverbial for what ? "

"For foolishness."

"And your opinion ? What is your opinion ? "

"My opinion ? " answered Goha.

"Yes. . . . Are people right to call you foolish ? "

Goha stood stupefied. Never had he dreamed of controlling other people's judgments. Men, terrible in their

scorn and in their numbers, represented fate to him, and since they were unanimous in speaking of his foolishness, he believed the question definitely settled. However, he wanted to show himself worthy of this exceptional mark of esteem and he sought for a brilliant reply.

"Goha's a fool ; so people say . . ."

"So people say," repeated Sheik al-Zaki.

"Where is Goha ?" continued Goha, encouraged by the master's approving silence. "Here he is ! Here he is ! Here he is !"

He broke into noisy laughter.

"Where is Goha ? I am Goha. Goha's a fool, so people say. . . . Goha ! Goha !"

He slapped the back of his neck and his thighs and began to dance to the accompaniment of uncouth exclamations and frenzied gesticulation. Around him had gathered an amused crowd that, infected by his madness, clapped hands in time to his chant.

"Hey ! Hey ! Where is Goha ? Here he is ! Goha's a fool . . . so people say. . . . Hey ! Hey ! Where is Goha ? Here he is !"

Loafers were running up and, as they caught Goha's words, they swelled the turbulent chorus with their voices shrill or low. It was no longer joy ; it was delirium, a delirium in which were fanaticism and anger.

Sheik al-Zaki alone resisted the general gaiety ; in the midst of the rabble's extravagances he remained mindful of his dignity. Calmly seated on his donkey he followed Goha's evolutions and murmured at times, "Strange creature. . . . Strange creature. . . ." His detachment from the scene was only assumed, however. As though in response to the persuasion of a rhythm or the call of a primitive emotion he vaguely felt the need to mingle with these men and yell with them, tossing the head and brandishing arms and legs.



“Hey ! Hey ! Where is Goha ? Here he is ! ”

Goha, tired out, wiped his forehead. He questioned the master with his eyes, seeking to discover if he was satisfied with him. “I answered you the best I could,” he seemed to say, and the sheik could not repress a smile.

“Do you want to climb up behind me on the donkey ? ” he suggested.

He had spoken loudly, as though to impose himself on the crowd's attention, and the men moved aside with deference. Goha climbed on the donkey to a chorus of discreet murmurs. The onlookers were astonished at this honour the famous sheik bestowed on an idiot.

“We'll talk as far as the entrance to the university,” added Sheik al-Zaki.

The way was not long. But at each step it was necessary to stop and answer the compliments of passers-by. The master questioned his young companion in a kindly voice. Goha scarcely listened, busy as he was trying to keep balance on the donkey's slippery rump. As Hawa had advised, he tried to address friendly and familiar words to the sheik, but at each attempt he almost fell into the gutter, and he could only emit little cries of fright. Fingers clutching the donkey's hide, he thought of the questions Hawa would ask him on his return and the reproaches she would shower on him. The University of al-Azar was in sight. Then, overcoming his fears, he placed his hand on Sheik al-Zaki's shoulder.

“You are married ! ” he exclaimed with beaming face.

Al-Zaki stopped to turn his donkey over to a bookseller who had his stall near the university.

Before disappearing among his pupils he begged Goha to call on him and, turning to a few students who watched this familiarity with scornful faces, he said :

“You are surprised to see me with this man. . . . Why ? ”

"Isn't he a lunatic?" answered one of them.

"He is not a lunatic," answered the sheik nervously.

He felt his pupil's contempt of Goha was in some way damaging to himself. He decided to make a vigorous defence of his young companion.

"Lunatics," he said, "are creatures whose souls are spoiled. The soul of an idiot, on the contrary, is pure. Consult the *Prolegomena* of Ibn al-Khaldoun. You will find at the end of the sixteenth preliminary discourse a series of distinctions with which you should be familiar. . . ."

And while speaking he approached his column, followed by his humbly listening students.

Goha called on his neighbour the same evening. When he had passed the monumental entrance he found himself in a paved court. The high enclosure, overgrown with honeysuckle and jasmine, was lined with banana-trees. To his right was the pavilion reserved for the reception of men; before him rose a great red building. Lattice-work masked the windows. Beyond the buildings spread the orchard and, at the rear, through the foliage of fig-trees and banyans, was outlined the white cupola of the tomb raised over the ashes of Sheik al-Zaki's pious ancestor.

Goha stopped, uncertain; a negro boy came and asked him what he wanted. Under an arbour covered with honeysuckle five men were squatting. In the centre of the group stood an earthen vessel filled with oil, in which swam slices of tomato and lemon, parsley, garlic and green peppers. Highly spiced bean balls were piled in rows on a dish. They had just been fried and they still sizzled. Khalil, in whose place the meal was served, presided. His guests were the two gardeners, Ibrahim, the thin-voiced eunuch, and a traveller who had asked hospitality. Khalil took half a cake of bread from a basket, stuffed it with a bean ball, rolled the whole in the palm of his

hand and offered the morsel to the stranger, whom he wished to honour with special attentions.

"What do you want? . . . What do you want? . . ." the negro boy was crying, holding Goha back by the caftan.

"What the devil do you want yourself?" retorted Goha, purple with rage.

Khalil had not judged it necessary to interrupt his meal for Goha and had sent his son instead. However, the argument between the child and the visitor was lengthening beyond reason, and he found himself obliged to turn his head and address the disturber.

"What is it? Hey! . . . Enough of that noise! . . ."

"Hey yourself!" roared Goha.

The porter looked at him for an instant with his great melancholy eyes, strange eyes in his black face, then he turned to Ibrahim the eunuch and politely invited him to dip his bread in the bowl.

"Hey yourself!" Goha repeated defiantly.

But Khalil was in no hurry.

"Go away!" he said after a long pause, making the motion of chasing a fly. "Go away! . . . There is no one for you in this house. . . ."

Attracted by the noise al-Zaki had come out to the courtyard. He took Goha by the arm and led him to the salamlek, where Waddah Alysum sat already.

"The son of Haj Mahmoud Riazzy honours us with his presence," he said as he entered.

Goha, who had recognised in Waddah Alysum his companion of an evening, forgot his father's warning. He rushed to the young man and kissed him on the shoulder. Alysum, eager to resume the interrupted conversation, returned his expressions of friendship with a certain reserve.

"You were telling me, master, of Sati, who foretold the Prophet's coming, and you said his body could be folded like a sheet."

"It is true. And I may add that magicians have often obtained similar results with men like Goha, you and me."

"I cannot conceive how my body could soften to the point of folding like a sheet," said Alysum.

"In any case, my dear boy, it would be too bad," answered the sheik mischievously.

He took down a volume bound in black morocco.

"Here," he said, "is Maslema's work on sorcery and magic. I brought it down from my library to read you certain passages. If you are interested to know in detail the experiment I speak of, we'll not fail to find the explanation here."

Alysum placed himself beside Sheik al-Zaki and together they turned the pages. Goha sat on a divan facing them. Saturated with the advice of Zeinab and his nurse he decided that politeness demanded he should break the silence.

"How are you?" he asked his host. "I hope you are well!"

Al-Zaki addressed a courteous word to him, then returned to Waddah Alysum.

"Here is the page. It is short and instructive. 'Plunge a man into a jar filled to the brim with oil of sesame, and keep him there forty days. In that period feed him exclusively on figs and walnuts, and when the forty days have passed all his flesh has disappeared and nothing of his body remains but the veins and seams of his skull. Take him out of the oil then, and, while he is drying through the action of the atmosphere, he will be in a proper state to answer all questions put to him. He unveils the issue reserved for certain enterprises, foresees failure or success.'"

Three slaves brought in narghiles, cakes and preserves, and spread them on stands.

"I have never taken part in such an experiment,"

said the sheik, "but I believe Maslema worthy of confidence."

"And how do you explain, father, how the ability to divine is given to anyone, faithful or unbeliever, black or white?"

"In the simplest manner," answered al-Zaki. "Men have a body and a soul, and the body blinds the soul. When we die the soul regains regions from which the past and, in a measure, the future are accessible. In our case the oil of sesame absorbs the tissues and, without causing immediate death, releases the spirit. In sum, nothing is kept of the flesh but the vitality needed to communicate with the living. You understand?"

Alysum bowed low.

"How could I fail to understand what Sheik al-Zaki, the scholar, the sage, deigns to explain for me?"

A few points were not quite clear. The text gave no information as to the resistance of the subject put to the test, his power to react, or his ability to understand the ordinary events of life, and, above all, it was not said whether, after the forty days, at the moment when he is being questioned and is drying in the wind, one should continue to feed him, and if that food should be figs and walnuts. The discussion lasted very late. It was night when Goha withdrew.

Hawa awaited him at the door. She assailed him with innumerable questions, to which he did not answer. Soon the three wives and the girls surrounded him in a noisy circle, clinging to him, begging him to speak. They were curious to know why the session had lasted so long. Zeinab assumed that the sheik must have retained her son, Hellal and Nassim thought that Goha, through lack of tact, had prolonged his visit beyond reason.

"Did he keep you?" cried Zeinab.

"Did you once make a move to get up?" cried Nassim.



"Speak, master!" implored Hawa.

Mahmoud raised his voice and put an end to the disorder. Then, having offered Goha his hand to kiss, he permitted him to sit on the divan and questioned him. Thus he learned of Waddah Alysum's presence.

"What did they talk about?" he asked.

"They want to put a man in oil," answered Goha.

The women looked at each other, impressed. As for Mahmoud, he did not know what to think.

Goha was not able to explain why Sheik al-Zaki proposed to accomplish this operation. He ended by saying that he had been warmly received, that he had eaten, drunk, smoked, and that al-Zaki had invited him to call every day.

Zeinab threw herself on her son and hugged him.

"Every day!" she exclaimed. "He must have found you very intelligent."

She really had a strong admiration for Goha, that circumstances had hitherto forced her to conceal. Each moment, witnessing his vagaries, she hoped for a miracle from which her son would spring endowed with all the graces of the mind. Sheik al-Zaki's sudden friendship seemed to her the brilliant proof that the event had come to pass.

Goha saw his credit rise in his family and in the city. His associations astonished some, made others indignant. Hawa alone found them perfectly natural. At night, on her mat, she covered Goha with kisses and reminded him of the dream she had had four months before.

"Do you remember? . . . I saw a ladder . . . tall, tall. . . . You, you were climbing the ladder. . . . If God permits it, you'll become the greatest sheik in the world."



## VIII

### THE REED PEN

FROM that day frequent intercourse was established between the master, Goha and Waddah Alysum. All three lingered far into the night hours. Goha, comfortably stretched on the divan, sipped cinnamon brews, chewed pistachios, and ended by going to sleep while his learned friends discoursed in low voices, consulted ancient texts, interrupting their arid labours to read a few poets, in particular Ibn al-Baowab, who celebrated with so much grace the beauties of calligraphy.

Sheik al-Zaki brought a warm and direct speech to these conversations. But one could see, by the serene expression of his face, that he no longer had the old passion for the things of the mind, and that he found in them no more than an agreeable diversion of the spirit. The contradictions of authors that had made him suffer to the point of feeling his own insignificance now seemed to him simply different forms of an immutable truth. In love with his wife he was tolerant of all that was a stranger to his love. The fact of his having invited Goha at the same time as Waddah Alysum was a clear indication of the state of his soul. He wanted to alleviate the austere character of his labours by the presence of the simple one, and he was careful to interrupt the weightiest discussions to question Goha on trivial subjects.

He noticed one day that the severe appearance of the salamlek was an obstacle to his need for intimacy, and he made arrangements to receive his friends in the library on the first floor of the main building.

The library was reached by a flight of fifteen steps

opening into an immense hall covered with Persian rugs. The walls were decorated with golden arabesques and Koranic maxims. The carved beams of the ceiling were set with agates. At the rear a broad marble stairway ended in the antechamber on the second floor. It was divided by a walnut partition, wrought after the manner of the lattices. On one side was the harem, comprising the apartments of Nour al-Ein and Mabrouka ; on the other side was the library.

It was there that the conversations of the three men were renewed. Alysum was conspicuous, especially by the extravagant colours of his caftans and his effeminate poses. Attentive to his master's slightest word he remained nevertheless careful of his own movements. Al-Zaki held him in affection. Attracted by the elongated face, with its fine lips, its thin straight nose, he loved him for his sensuous youth, he loved him because he found in him, without admitting it to himself, a little of Nour al-Ein.

In Goha, who appreciated in these meetings the narghile and the confections that the slaves offered him, Sheik al-Zaki discovered strange attractions. From the contemplation of his opposite he drew new ideas that he enjoyed noting down. After his friends had left, squatting on the divan with a sheet in the palm of his left hand, he made the light reed pen race. "This afternoon," he wrote, "Alysum said to me : 'Goha hasn't the face of an idiot.' I have just leaned out over my garden. I looked at an orange-tree in blossom. It seemed to me like a smile of life. . . . Goha is like that tree."

## IX

### BEHIND THE LATTICES

**O**LD Mirmah, Nour al-Ein's slave, sat in the ante-chamber on the first floor. She had nearly finished sifting the wheat that Sheik al-Zaki had ground every month for the needs of the household. Already the cook had refused to make date cakes, on the pretext that she had no flour.

"No flour!" grumbled Mirmah, dipping a handful of grains from a bag. "That's all right for the Roumis. But that a pious Moslem like Sheik al-Zaki should lack flour! . . . No, no, that must not be!"

After an attentive scrutiny she dropped the grains into a tray, and the straws and pebbles remaining in the palm of her hand she discarded into a basin.

"And Nour al-Ein," she said tenderly, "Nour al-Ein, my little lady who wants date cake to eat."

She broke off to study a strangely shaped grain of wheat.

Suddenly she pricked up her ears. Calls and hand-clapping rose from the first floor.

"Attention!" Ibrahim the eunuch was calling. "Attention!"

"Allah! . . . Allah! . . ." exclaimed Mirmah. She knew the signal. Feverishly she put the sack and the basin on the tray, put the whole on her head and sprang into the harem.

"Men! . . . Hide yourselves! . . . Men!" she cried.

Mabrouka, who was smoking her ebony chibouk, and Nour al-Ein, who was braiding her hair, appeared at their doors.

“Hide yourselves,” Mirmah repeated.

Negresses emerged from the passage. They opened great astonished eyes. Was it true that men were coming into the house? After a moment of hesitation mistresses and servants, instead of taking refuge in their rooms, ran jostling to the partition of the antechamber that marked the extreme limit of their domain.

Nour al-Ein threw herself on the tiles, kneeling, and, face pressed against the wooden grill, watched the opening of the stairs. Her black and tufted hair puffed out over her shoulders. She was pale and her eyes were hard. Mabrouka, pretending indifference, purposely put out the fire of her chibouk. Behind her the slaves pressed against each other. A little apart stood old Mirmah, whose eyelids and wrinkle-furrowed lips quivered.

It was Goha who appeared first. Reaching the landing he stopped and, turning toward Sheik al-Zaki and Waddah Alysum, made them a deep bow.

Seeing Waddah Alysum's fine profile, Nour al-Ein was seized with sudden anger. A flush coloured her cheeks and she violently pinched the nervous leg of Amina, her favourite slave, who stood beside her. At the cry that the young Syrian gave, confusion arose among the women. The sheik threw a severe look toward the wooden partition, but his sense of propriety triumphed over his irritation. He went rapidly toward the library, followed by his guests, raised the heavy hanging and disappeared.

“Little mistress, did you see how angry the master was?” stammered Amina.

The cook, who for twenty years had belonged to Mabrouka, took her to task.

“You—you deserve to have Ibrahim whip you!” she exclaimed.

“And you, to have him hang you!” retorted Mirmah, taking the young Syrian's part.

She hated this negress who, to please Mabrouka, never ceased to ill-treat Nour al-Ein's slaves.

"You—I advise you to shut up!" exclaimed the cook.

"And you to be quiet!" answered Mirmah, quivering. "Only this morning you refused to make date cake for Nour al-Ein."

Nour al-Ein and Mabrouka felt in the servants' quarrel an echo of their own antagonism. They pretended indifference, however. Nour al-Ein retained her stiff smile and Mabrouka her scornful air, but the one and the other, listening to the dialogue of the two old women, inwardly rejoiced as the retort fell from Mirmah's toothless mouth or from the thick lips of the cook.

"You've been in this house for six months and you think yourselves the mistresses from all time!"

"Certainly! Is it our fault if the sheik finds Nour al-Ein's skin softer than velvet?"

"No! Life is no more worth living! Now one hides to look at young men who pass."

"Speak for yourself," retorted Mirmah, who realised the ridiculousness of this reproach.

Mabrouka then decided to intervene in order to repair the cook's clumsiness.

"I came for the sheik," she said haughtily, casting a contemptuous glance at Nour al-Ein.

Nour al-Ein did not answer.

"I came for the sheik," repeated Mabrouka, exasperated by her rival's silence.

Meanwhile the young woman had risen; she put out her hand to Amina and retired to her apartment.

"They are making fun of us!" cried the cook in a rage.

"Never mind . . . never mind . . ." answered Mabrouka.

Humiliated by her rival's attitude she strove to safeguard her prestige with her servant. Besides, the sense of

her impotence inclined her to resignation. Nour al-Ein had too much power to be antagonised. Wise through experience, she feared by pushing her too far to lose even the show of respect due her in her capacity of first wife of Sheik al-Zaki.

"Come, sisters," she said with a sigh. "Our time is past. . . . If only the sheik is happy!"

"What is past?" protested the slave. "I swear you are more beautiful than that other one. You are pink and white, your nose is an almond, and honey drops from your mouth."

On entering her room Nour al-Ein had stretched herself on a divan. Kneeling beside her Amina lovingly studied her feline face, while stroking her dishevelled hair.

"Ah, I love you!" she murmured.

She bent toward her mistress and placed kisses on her grey eyes with their curved lashes, and on her pointed chin tattooed with three blue stars. Nour al-Ein received the young girl's caresses without returning them. Not a muscle of the face moved under the pressure of the moist lips. Her forehead contracted, eyelids half-closed, she remained rigid, as though altogether tensed in the effort of thinking. Daughter of a Caucasian and an Arab, she was lighter in colour than the Egyptians. Short of body, narrow of chest, with broad hips and slender legs, she had an unhealthy grace.

Al-Zaki had possessed her with naïve joy, and the contrast between his ravaged face, framed in a grisly beard, and the childish words he spoke had given the girl a feeling as of something ridiculous and contemptible. When she saw him bent over ancient texts that she was incapable of deciphering she felt a wave of timid respect. But at once the memory of his love words returned to her.

She had been allured at first by the luxury he displayed to receive her, then she had become accustomed to the



friezes on the walls, the rugs of silk, the silver needle-cases. To make her content the sheik lavished luxuries on her. His lands in the provinces of Qualiubia and Manufia were among the most fertile in Egypt. Heretofore he had spent no more than a fifth of his income, but since his marriage the thousands of *kantars* of beans, of sugar-cane and corn were scarcely enough to meet his expenses. He was forced to curtail his liberalities to the poor.

Nour al-Ein loved sparkling things and often valued them by weight alone. Al-Zaki's generosity permitted her rapidly to amass a hoard and flattered her evil instincts.

"Nour al-Ein, look ! I have brought you some earrings. The stones are flawless."

She would take them with a bored gesture, throw them a furtive glance and let them drop beside her without saying a word. But when her husband had gone she would pick up the jewels, examine them feverishly and call Amina.

"My dear," she would cry in a voice that was almost hoarse, "look, look ! aren't they beautiful ?"

"Less than you are. . . . Less than the smallest gleam of your eye."

"No, no ! Answer me. . . . How much are they worth? . . . Two hundred sequins ?"

"Less than your slightest smile."

"More, much more than two hundred sequins ?"

After these outbursts of enthusiasm she resumed the injured air that had become habitual with her since her marriage. She had brought to her new home Amina, a young Syrian of her own age ; old Mirmah, and Yasmine, a negress whose arms were of faultless outline. Despite the company of these women, who had for her an animal devotion, Nour al-Ein was bored. Mabrouka especially was odious to her. The advice she lavished on her every moment and the interminable reflections she gave out

over the simplest matters exasperated her. One day she had been insolent and Mabrouka had paced the harem until night, crying her indignation.

"I knew it. . . . I said it. . . . If it had been a girl of twelve I'd have brought her up properly. . . . But, naturally, I'm not listened to. . . . My word isn't considered. . . ."

This scene had amused Nour al-Ein, who had taken her place behind the door to hear better.

"No! No! No!" pursued Mabrouka. "She mustn't think, this little one who has just come into my house—I was in this house before she was born—go and tell her she mustn't think that I, the elder, the loyal wife, will submit to the impudence of a girl who has just come into my house, my house. . . ."

"Don't torment yourself," implored the cook. "I swear the sheik will say you were right. . . ."

But the good Mabrouka had been inconsolable. Despite his repugnance, Sheik al-Zaki had had to interfere. At the end of a week's parleying he had managed to restore peace in his harem. Nour al-Ein, at the price of a sapphire ring, had consented to kiss the hand of the offended one, who, at the price of a silk handkerchief, had consented to forgive her.

At the memory of this scene that had marked Mabrouka's downfall Nour al-Ein twisted her arms and, rubbing her eyes, "Amina," she said, "Amina. . . . How bored I am!"

She gave a long yawn that revealed her irregular white teeth and her pink palate.

"Which do you prefer?" asked Amina, smiling.

"Which what? What do you mean?"

Nour al-Ein had straightened up and, elbow resting on the divan, turned an impassive face to the Syrian.

"Come . . . speak," she continued, with a scarcely perceptible quivering of the nostrils.

"You understand me well enough . . ." simpered the Syrian, without losing her assurance.

She paused, then continued, winking mischievously :

"Above all, don't go and love the one with the round face and bulging chest. . . . He's a half-wit and his name is Goha. . . . But the other one . . . who knows what his name is ? "

Two hands fell on the slave's blond tresses and pulled them furiously.

"I forbid you !" cried Nour al-Ein, "I forbid you ! . . . and also, go away ! Go away ! I don't want to see you again ! "

The Syrian laughingly imprisoned the little painted hands and, still kneeling, kissed her mistress's wrathful brow.

"How pretty you are," she said, "when you cry !" And in a low voice she added : "Ah ! If he could see you like this ! . . ."

The hints of her slave, mingled with her caresses, induced in Nour al-Ein a sensuous torpor. Besides, she wanted to avoid a discussion, fearing, without admitting it to herself, that it would give form to the vague emotions floating within her. Already her long lashes had touched and an even breathing came through her half-closed lips. The shrill music of crickets in the garden mingled with the humming of bees. Motionlessly she was conscious of the fusion of sounds that comes before sleep. Then, slowly, an image rose before her closed eyelids. She recognised the profile of Alysum.

"Amina ! . . . Amina ! . . ." she cried, touching the shoulder of the Syrian, who dozed on the Smyrna rug. "Amina, wake up ! "

At this moment old Mirmah appeared in the doorway, entirely nude despite the winter.

"The day is sweet," she said in her tremulous voice.

"Aren't you hungry? I've brought you some candied rose petals."

"Ah, it's you, mother! . . . Come near me, come till I kiss you."

"First refresh your pretty mouth, Nour al-Ein," continued the old nurse, holding out a silver fruit-dish in her trembling hands.

Amina awoke and saw her mistress sucking at a little filigree spoon. Having wiped her lips with her fingers Nour al-Ein seized old Mirmah by the skin of her stomach.

"Come, I'm bored. . . . Tell me a story. . . ."

"Which one?" asked Mirmah.

"Any one. . . ."

"I'll tell you the story of the prince who, by the aid of a magic mirror, could tell if a girl was a virgin . . ."

"No! No! I want the story of Melek."

The old woman sighed and, seating herself beside Amina, remained some time without speaking. She always preceded her tales by a long pause for meditation, but when she was going to speak about Melek a certain sadness was mingled with her silence. Melek, whose nurse she had been, was Nour al-Ein's mother. She had died from a scorpion's sting three years after her marriage, and Mirmah, transferring all her affection to Nour al-Ein, had felt that her work was all to do over again and that this child was Melek, who lived a second time.

"Well, dear?" said Nour al-Ein, impatient to hear the story of her mother that Mirmah had told her so often. "I'm listening and Amina is listening. . . ."

"One night, in a village in the Caucasus, the people were awakened by the screams of a woman. She was immediately carried far from the houses, for a woman in childbirth is unclean. Alone, under a roof of foliage, she brought her child into the world. Days and days passed. Then one morning the mother of the woman came to her.

‘Get up, my pigeon,’ she said, ‘I’m going to take you back to the village.’ The woman did not move : she had just died. The body was still warm, but the heart did not beat. On the ground a little girl babbled and waved her arms as the birds flap their wings. She was called Melek, and her mother was buried.”

The old woman spoke steadily, without the slightest variation in tone, so as well to indicate the unimportant character of this preamble. Having ascertained by a glance that Nour al-Ein was listening, she projected a thread of saliva to the tiles and continued :

“I lived on the other side of the mountains, very far, very far. . . . One day, when I was cutting grapes, a man on horseback threw me over his saddle and carried me away. . . . It was Melek’s father. On entering his house he said to me : ‘You have the breasts of a mother.’ I answered that it was true—that I was married and was nursing a boy. ‘That is good,’ he said. ‘Now you will nourish my daughter and you will live with me.’ Ah ! He was right. I was beautiful. My mouth was a pistachio, my eyes were brilliants and my body was a tuberose. . . .”

The wrinkled and tremulous face of Mirmah lit up with a smile and her long nose met her chin.

“I loved Melek like my own child. . . .”

“Was she pretty ?” interrupted Nour al-Ein.

“How can you ask me if she was pretty when she drank the milk of my breast ? Yes, darling, my milk beautified her. . . . At three she was a flower.”

Sniffing loudly in the palm of her hand she added :

“A flower you might have breathed in like that !”

“Could she dance ?” asked Amina.

“Eh, you’re in a great hurry, my dear,” answered the old woman. “Of course she could dance. . . . But you don’t give me time to speak.”

“Don’t be angry, mother,” begged the Syrian.



"You'll make me die if you don't go on," said Nour al-Ein.

Satisfied, Mirmah let fly another jet of saliva.

"Now," she continued, "Melek was a big girl. As the virgins in my country do, she danced nude. When travellers knocked at our door she undressed, by her father's order, to brighten the house with the whiteness of her body. And the travellers were dazzled, as though they had looked at the sun. . . . At the hour of sleep Melek accompanied the guest into the room offered him."

"What did she do in there?" asked Nour al-Ein with a slight quiver. "Speak! You're killing me!"

"Eh, you know very well," answered Mirmah, smiling. "How often have I told you. . . ."

"She remained a virgin just the same?"

"Yes, Nour al-Ein, she remained a virgin. Otherwise the man had to marry her, or else . . ."

She made the motion of sinking a dagger into the breast.

"One evening, I remember, it was raining in torrents, a stranger came to our house. He was a rug merchant who came from Ispahan and whose name was Abd al-Rahman. . . . I give him *kaimak*, honey and bread. Melek sleeps. I bend over her, I shake her. 'My heart, apple of my eye, you must do your duty.' She rises, and when the traveller finds her in his room he appears discontented. . . . Your mother takes off her dress. . . . He looks at her. . . . Poor girl, it is the first time she is greeted with so much coolness. . . . Then . . ."

Mirmah unhooked a tambourine from the wall and shook it over her head.

"Melek dances, dances, and Abd al-Rahman remains unmoved."

"Did she love him then, to want to win him?"

"And how should she not have loved him, little lady, when he had so much scorn for her? Melek dances and



sings. Her body bends like a reed. The man looks and says nothing. . . . Melek removes the bracelets that adorn her ankles and wrists, she unties her hair. . . . She is erect, very pale, thighs pressed together. . . . Suddenly she throws the tambourine away angrily, gives a great cry and, jumping on Abd al-Rahman, she plays like a lion cub on his knees. . . . At that moment she knew her first desire."

In turn haughty, impetuous, coaxing, Mirmah had reproduced all the movements, all the cries of Melek, careless of the contrast between her voluptuous poses and her withered flesh.

Prostrate on the tiling now, she breathed with difficulty.

"And the end, Mirmah, the end?" asked Nour al-Ein.

"The next day the traveller gave a purse filled with gold to Melek's father and took the girl and her nurse."

The story of her mother upset Nour al-Ein, especially since her marriage to Sheik al-Zaki. The mountains, the fevered nights, the seductions upon unknown wayfarers, in fine, Melek's existence she, her daughter, had not even glimpsed. Her childhood had been dull beside a father who, at the age of seventy, was almost a patriarch. When she thought of her lamentable relations with Sheik al-Zaki she buried her head in the cushions and her body assumed strained attitudes. She felt the need of exaggerating her distress to herself and to those around her. Still, by a strange contradiction of her nature, she despised the consolations that her pantomime brought. Sometimes she even received them with laughs that were almost sneers.

That is how she answered the Syrian, who asked her tenderly if Mirmah's story had made her sad.

"How foolish you are, Amina! I'm not sad! I am enjoying myself."

## X

### WARDA THE DALLALA

**T**HE next day, in Nour al-Ein's room, Amina watched from behind the lattice for the arrival of the visitors. She turned at times toward her mistress and invited her to come nearer the window.

"Come, come . . ." she said. "By the time you get up they'll have passed."

Nour al-Ein tried to smile at Amina's words, made fun of her impatience and called her curiosity absurd and childish. In reality the Syrian's frankness worried her.

"You're only a child, darling."

"Admit you love him—admit it !"

At this sentence, whose return she had feared, her face contracted. She felt anger and hatred toward Amina ; and when she saw she could no longer ignore what she wanted to ignore she collapsed, sobbing, on the carpet.

"Little lady, what's the matter ? Why are you sad ?"

"Amina, Amina, I feel as if my heart had been eaten."

It was in these words that she made the avowal of a love she had just realised, before its time. The young women were still at their effusions when the thin voice of Ibrahim the eunuch sounded.

"Attention ! Attention !"

With one bound they threw themselves toward the window. Nour al-Ein, with fingers nervously clutching the wooden lattice, felt an emotion so vivid that the sight became blurred before her eyes.

"I didn't see him !" she wailed, when the men reached the steps.

"How could you have seen him?" answered the Syrian, laughing. "His face was veiled."

"Shh! Don't talk so loud. . . ."

"How afraid you are!"

"I don't want Mabrouka to hear us."

"Oh, that one . . ." exclaimed the slave, with a threatening gesture. "My little lady," she added, in a coaxing voice, "let us go into the antechamber."

She seized Nour al-Ein by her blue tunic:

"Quick, quick, before they pass."

Nour al-Ein made a movement to follow her, then changed her mind:

"No, I won't go."

"But why?" implored the slave.

"Because . . ."

Nour al-Ein stopped, flushing. She had remembered a long-forgotten sight. Two years before her marriage she had witnessed in a public place the stoning of an adulterous woman. She saw again the bloody face of the guilty one. . . .

"Leave me! Leave me!" she continued, concealing her terror. "I won't go."

Thinking it a whim of her mistress, Amina contented herself with answering:

"As you will, little lady."

The young women now spoke with less freedom. Each affected a playful tone, without being deceived by the other's pretence.

"Listen . . ." said Amina. "They are in the antechamber."

"I hear them laughing. . . . They are gay. . . ."

"Goha must have said something foolish."

"Unless it's the other," answered Nour al-Ein, with an effort.

"The other. . . . I'd like to know his name."

“And if you knew it ? . . . Would you be happier ? First of all he wears a veil like a woman, and I like men who are strong. . . .”

Amina looked at her mistress in surprise, wondering if her indifference was sincere.

“Then you prefer Goha ? ” she asked.

“At least that one shows his face ; he has nothing to hide.”

“Nour al-Ein ! ” Amina exclaimed, abashed. “You’ll make me lose my head.”

To heighten the slave’s confusion Nour al-Ein continued in a sarcastic voice :

“Beware of men, my dear. . . . Suppose you fall in love with Goha and forget yourself . . . have you thought of the consequences ? ”

“What consequences ? ”

“Allah ! What a fool you are, my dear. . . . Believe me, the sheik hasn’t lost sight of you. . . . He hasn’t bothered with you yet, but to-morrow, perhaps, he’ll ask for you. . . .”

“Oh ! The sheik loves you,” interrupted the slave. “And what am I beside Nour al-Ein ? ”

The discussion ended on this question. Nour al-Ein shut herself up in her customary silence and Amina went to join the old Circassian. Her mistress’s remark in turn frightened and flattered her instinct of coquetry. From that time on when she met Sheik al-Zaki she hesitated between the desire to flee and the desire to please. She lowered her eyes, while her hand mechanically pulled at the tunic around her throat. That was only a passing mannerism, however. She understood that the sheik paid no attention whatsoever to her. When he spoke to her it was always with that aloof politeness he used toward inferiors.

For weeks Nour al-Ein questioned no one for fear of

awaking suspicion. Her passion for the unknown with the fine profile mingled with exasperation in the silence of her thoughts, and, sometimes when alone at night, she suffered not to be able to evoke by name the image she loved. She wanted to give him a name of her own choosing. Finding none worthy of her love she innocently asked Mirmah to repeat a few at random. The old servant recited the names of the milkman, the miller, the water-carrier and all the tradesmen of the quarter. Nour al-Ein dismissed her angrily.

Nour al-Ein was accustomed to receiving Warda, the dallala, whose trade consisted in making the round of the harems to display the merchandise entrusted her by the principal dealers of the city. One day, when the dallala was with her, at the moment when the young men crossed the courtyard she could not control herself and questioned her.

The dallala, who had approached the window, gave an evasive answer.

"I think I saw a veil over his face," she said.

"He raises it before crossing the vestibule," replied Nour al-Ein.

Brows knit, the dallala appeared to be thinking.

"There are three in the city who cover their heads. One is called Akr Zaid Tai, another Waddah Alysum and the last Mokawa Kendi. They are famous for their beauty. . . . That is all I can tell you. . . ."

She awaited an avowal. Seeing that Nour al-Ein avoided her eyes she brought her heavy hennaed hand down on the young woman's knees.

"Next time," she promised, "I'll tell you his name."

"It's useless, Warda," stammered Nour al-Ein. "It doesn't matter to me."

"And why shouldn't you know his name? Is there any wrong in knowing his name?"

And to calm the scruples of Sheik al-Zaki's young wife she displayed a piece of silk and detailed its qualities.

Warda was thick, one-eyed and more than forty years old. The commissions she received on her sales formed only a part of her income. More than her taste in the choice of cotton prints, her understanding in all affairs of the heart recommended her to her clients' esteem. She could foretell the future. Squatting on the rug, her dress pulled up over her short and enormously fat legs, she would spread a pack of cards before impatient lovers.

She knew infallible formulas to arouse desire in the most rebellious natures, and she gave amulets against the evil eye. A confirmed gossip, she retailed avidly garnered scandals from house to house. Her obscene sayings, her flatteries, her cleverness in bringing hesitant ones to lean to the side of vice made her a notable go-between.

After her half-confidence Nour al-Ein quietly awaited the dallala's coming. Lying on her divan like an inert thing she watched the slow progress of the hours. Expert hands had taken possession of her sentiment and were directing it toward some terrible sin. To extenuate her dumb acquiescence she liked to consider Warda an insurmountable will. "What can I do against that woman?" she would say to herself, speciously assuming the air of a victim. Until the dallala's return she had no aim but to saturate herself thoroughly with the sense of her own impotence. She succeeded in convincing herself that the whole weight of the contemplated sin would fall on Warda, and she struck her breast as she repeated: "What can I do against that woman?"

On the fourth day of waiting tears rolled down her cheeks. She had become the plaything of her own self-deception. . . . At times the torture of the adulterous fellaha returned to her mind. She would lean on her elbows at the window and sing or call Yasmine of the



pretty arms and ask her to dance. The slave twisted her supple body, emitting cries of hate or love. Nour al-Ein seemed to see in these contortions of the legs, the body, the neck, the agonising convulsions of the adulterous woman.

“That will be enough, daughter. . . .”

But she had to repeat her command several times before Yasmine heard it. She would stop with an evil laugh, and her perspiring body shone like a black diamond. One morning Nour al-Ein had said to her : “Teach me your dance, Yasmine.” And in the room she had followed, almost nude, the directions of the negress, even inventing new attitudes.

“That’s fine !” exclaimed old Mirmah.

She had recognised Melek’s grace in Nour al-Ein. Delighted, she played an accompaniment on the donkey-skin of a *tarabouka* while she chanted :

“La ! La ! I see your mother. . . . La ! La ! . . . Dance, my gazelle. . . . La ! La ! Daughter of Melek. . . . La ! La ! I see your mother. . . .”

When Nour al-Ein sat down, panting, the old woman caressed her tenderly.

“You are light as a dry leaf,” she said.

Seeing a fold between her lady’s eyebrows she threatened her with the finger and darted away after whispering in her ear :

“Your mother drank my milk . . . and you, you are hiding a secret from me !”

“So she knows,” thought Nour al-Ein. This discovery gave her the feeling that she was at grips with fatal forces and that she ought to submit obediently to the law.

“I know his name,” announced the dallala, when she returned to see Nour al-Ein.

“Whose name ?”

“You’ve forgotten so soon ?” asked Warda, indignant.

"And me going the rounds of the whole city. . . . I wore out a pair of babouches to learn . . . what I learned."

"I'll pay you for it, Warda. . . ."

"No. . . . Since you've forgotten I'll tell you nothing, and you may keep your money. . . ."

Nour al-Ein asked her if her health was good. Uneasy, although sensing a ruse, the dallala continued :

"I know his name and his house. . . . But all that doesn't interest you."

"And your business is going well ? " continued Nour al-Ein. "Are they buying much in the harems ? "

For a moment the dallala remained speechless. She could clearly read the hypocrisy on the young woman's smiling face, but there was in her so much assurance that she hesitated to unmask her.

"It isn't well," she exclaimed at last. "You are making fun of me and I am only a poor woman. If you want me to go away, I'll go."

Nour al-Ein took her hand to show her friendship, then, in a muffled voice she said :

"Well . . . speak ! "

"Here you are . . ." answered Warda, fixing her eyes on Nour al-Ein. "The young man who comes to visit your husband is Waddah Alysum."

"Ah ? "

"Yesterday, with his two friends, he was at the baths."

"Which ? "

"Far from here. . . . He lives on the other side of Cairo. . . . The palace his father left him is at the point of the Khalig."

"A pretty palace ? "

"A prince's palace, my dear. . . . The Nile flows under the windows on the north, the south, the west . . . the eastern windows open on a garden full of trees."

Nour al-Ein was silent. Doubtless Waddah Alysum

lived alone. Why shouldn't he take her away to this house that she would embellish with her beauty, that she would animate with her dances and her songs ?

"If you like, Nour al-Ein, next time I'll bring you a fruit or a flower from his garden. . . . Only I am poor. . . . Business is bad. . . . Five harems have lost their fortunes. . . . Mameluke Ali Bey killed the masters and confiscated their money. . . ."

Without answering, Nour al-Ein drew from her arm two golden bracelets and handed them to her. . . . The dallala swore she had need of nothing, that Allah had not deserted her, and hastened to stuff the bracelets into a bag hanging at her neck, tucked between her enormous breasts.

"Tell me something more," begged Nour al-Ein.

"I heard him speak," resumed Warda, wiping with the corner of her sleeve the eyelid that hung bloody over her empty socket. "Oh, my dear, he talked, he talked. . . . It was like a fine embroidery of gold. . . ."

As she took her leave of Nour al-Ein the latter said :

"Why think of Waddah Alysum ? I'll never know him."

"Can one defy one's fate ? " retorted Warda.

These last words took anchor in the young woman's mind and confirmed the sense she had of the fatality of her passion. The fear the memory of the adulterous woman had given her she could dispose of by subtle comparisons, now that her decision had been taken. "She was ugly and I am pretty," she thought. "She was a common fellaha and I am a lady."

Having seriously resolved to make herself loved by Waddah Alysum, she clearly envisaged the difficulties to overcome and the dangers to guard against.

The dallala, scenting an excellent affair, came daily to see her, seeking to inspire confidence in her. Soon Nour

al-Ein was led to frank avowals and to a clear notion of her desire. The way thereafter was open to intrigue. They held mysterious conversations, to which neither Mirmah nor the Syrian were admitted. From the first day they agreed on one point : that a conciliatory attitude would have to be purchased from Mabrouka.

Warda spoke ceaselessly of her tact, boasted of her artfulness, exalted her spirit of self-sacrifice as well as her sensitiveness to signs of danger : " I have experience," she would say. " Follow my advice. . . . You are served like a Sultanness," she added, pressing Nour al-Ein's leg with a maternal gesture. " My dear, you are a child. . . . What would you have done without me ? "

Nour al-Ein repressed her desire to watch Alysum pass through the antechamber, contenting herself with seeing him through the window, and this reserve coincided with an increasing politeness in her relations with Mabrouka. During the meals they shared she begged her to help herself well and offered her the best pieces of meat, drawing them out of the pot with her fingers. When Mabrouka was visited by her old friends Nour al-Ein did not delay over her toilet. She bustled around the women, lavishing compliments on them and effusively kissing their flabby cheeks.

" Allah preserve your head ! " exclaimed the dallala, who was keeping a careful check on results. " You are cunning as a monkey, my dear. . . . "

One day there was between Nour al-Ein and the dallala a longer and more excited discussion than usual. Warda rang the changes on her title to the universal gratitude of women in love, and Nour al-Ein protested. The name of Mabrouka was frequently repeated. " We must win her in a more conclusive way," said Warda. " The more we give, the more she will resist," answered the other. But in the end it was Nour al-Ein who gave in. She recognised

that her counsellor's strategy was superior. That very evening she put it into effect.

As al-Zaki was in her room, seated near her, she affected a worried air.

"Leave me alone, I am sad," she said, seizing the hand that stroked her loosened hair.

"Why are you sad, child?" asked the sheik anxiously.

Nour al-Ein lowered her eyes.

"You'll say I am foolish," she murmured. "Oh, I have nothing to complain of. . . . You are good to me, you come often to see me, you give me wonderful jewels, in your house I am respected. . . ."

"Well, then, child? Speak without fear; I shall understand you. . . ."

"Well, this is it: I think of Mabrouka. . . . You never give Mabrouka anything, and you never go to see her. . . . She has been your wife for twenty-five years and she hasn't the quarter of the rings and necklaces I have. . . ."

Cushioned against the chest of her husband, whom she intoxicated with the odour of roses with which she had perfumed herself, she talked to him in a childish, singing voice:

"Mabrouka is so good. . . . She is very pretty. . . . Her skin is whiter than mine. . . . She mustn't suffer from my coming to your harem. . . . If she doesn't suffer from it, she will love me; if she does, she won't. . . ."

She stopped, blushing, pressed closer against her husband, and raising to him great innocent eyes:

"Promise me," she continued, "that you'll go now and then to visit her in her room. . . . You haven't done it since our wedding."

So much kindness had softened Sheik al-Zaki. He released his embrace, fearing to hurt this precious object whose soul was so delicate.



“My pearl,” he said, “my little pearl. . . . Your heart has the beauty of your face. . . . I promise you everything you want.”

Between creatures of the same mentality understanding is intuitive. The first time the sheik honoured Mabrouka, whom he had neglected so long, the latter had no illusions. She sensed that this advantage came from her rival, and when she received a ruby brooch she understood that this precious gift was either compensation for a sacrifice to which she soon would have to consent, or the price of passive complicity. Old and powerless, she thought the best thing for her was to profit by the occasions Nour al-Ein offered her, and to accept without vain resistance the fate the latter was preparing for her. Nothing indicated the end of this regime of generosity and conjugal attentions which gave her the illusion of a second youth. The tyranny of the new-comer imposed itself under a pleasant exterior. Nour al-Ein succeeded in winning Mabrouka. One day, after the meal, she drew from her finger the sapphire ring she had received at the time of their quarrel.

“I won’t keep this jewel,” she said. “I had offended you. The sapphire is for the one who forgave.”

Meanwhile Nour al-Ein was eager to put an end to these expensive presents and complained to Warda.

“It’s all over, my dear,” answered the dallala. “The affair has gone just as I wanted it to. . . . I have only to speak to the old woman, and I am going to do that this very moment.”

Short, thick, breathless, she moved away with a heavy tread that shook the room and came to Mabrouka.

“May your day be blessed!” she exclaimed as she entered.

Mabrouka gave an exclamation of pleased surprise. Although she considered Warda an inferior creature,



she was flattered to receive her. But, mortified by her assiduous visits to Nour al-Ein, she insisted on voicing a reproach.

"Go away," she said laughingly. "Go to the young one, the beautiful one. . . . Why waste your time with an old woman like me ? "

"You are sparkling like the sun," answered Warda as she sat down. "By the grace of Allah you are well ? "

"Bad . . . very bad," groaned Mabrouka, for fear of the evil eye. "And what do you come to tell me ? "

Conversation languished. Mabrouka ordered coffee and preserves. Then she proudly displayed the sheik's gifts : the ruby brooch, a pair of turquoises mounted as earrings and a heavy gold necklace.

"Naturally," exclaimed the dallala. "Is there another beside you worthy to wear such jewellery ? "

Although Mabrouka knew what to attribute her husband's attentions to, she could not resist the pleasure of making Warda think the sheik was returning to her and that he loved her as on the day after her wedding. She spoke of their relations with emotion and praised the Lord for his goodwill. Warda stimulated her to exaggeration and, when Mabrouka ended at last, she exclaimed :

"It is just on that account that I came to speak to you ; what you tell me I had guessed. . . . There is nowhere in the world a better heart than yours. . . . You protest ? May the tomb of my father be accursed if I lie ! Well ! It is to your heart that I address myself. . . . Nour al-Ein, poor child, is unhappy ; Nour al-Ein weeps. . . . She is jealous of you. . . . You are too beautiful and Sheik al-Zaki neglects her to intoxicate himself with your virtue and your beauty. . . . A sumptuous house, a palace, is for sale, very near here. . . . You will live there in peace with your slaves. . . . The sheik will buy it for you and he will often go to see you. So, O my moon,

Nour al-Ein will be happy—she adores you, that little one, but she is so jealous!—Nour al-Ein will be happy and you, you will be a householder. . . . That is what I ask of your great heart, so pure, so compassionate, so generous. . . .”

At this firm speech, more a command than a plea, Mabrouka understood that her dignity required acceptance, and that a refusal, in delaying for a few days her inevitable defeat, would only impose horrible humiliations on her. Gravely she answered :

“You are right, Warda. . . . Because I love the sheik, I will do what you advise. . . .”

Warda, who had not expected such docility and had armed herself with threatening arguments, felt herself all the more moved because the old woman made visible efforts to overcome her hurt. But time pressed—Nour al-Ein was waiting impatiently in her room. Besides, Mabrouka might have taken advantage of a minute of relenting to take back her word and hope once more. The dallala clasped the old wife in her arms and hastened to rejoin Nour al-Ein, who assailed her with questions.

“Hush,” Warda interrupted gaily. “You don’t deserve to have me bother with you.”

“I am listening to you, mother. . . . Don’t let me languish !”

“The day is falling already. . . . I will be brief. I have made Mabrouka decide to separate from you. . . . She will live in a little tumble-down house at the other end of the city. In your turn you must make the sheik decide this very night to send her there. . . . You will tell him you are jealous. . . . Well, make your own arrangements—— Don’t forget, my dear,” she added as she left, “I would have myself killed for a smile from your lips.”

Left alone, Nour al-Ein fell prey to a mad agitation.

She sang, danced, laughed. . . . At times she stopped before a mirror, looked long at herself, and roguishly stuck out her tongue. Mabrouka's departure was for her the levelling of every obstacle: Alysum's embrace was near. It seemed to her that trees, animals and people were in expectation of this event, that it was indispensable to universal happiness.

It was night when Sheik al-Zaki came in. He found his young wife on the bed, her face buried in the pillow.

"What is it, my child? Are you crying?"

"No, don't touch me . . . let me alone, love your Mabrouka and let me alone. . . ."

"Is it really possible?" stammered Sheik al-Zaki, completely astounded.

"Oh! I've well understood that you love that woman more than me. . . . Why? Why?" she added, with a trembling of her little clenched fists.

"But it is you yourself who asked me. . . ."

"I didn't know. . . . No! I didn't know. . . . Allah! Make me die!"

In vain the sheik strove to convince her that her fears were groundless, absurd. . . . To all his protestations she shook her head and repeated in a hurt and obstinate voice:

"No! No!"

"Come, what must I do to make you understand? Do you want me to separate from Mabrouka? Do you want me to install her in another house?"

Nour al-Ein raised herself gently, and smiling through her tears:

"It's true, it's true?" she said.

She clasped her white arms around his brown and wrinkled neck:

"It's true that you will do that for me?"

The sheik wiped her eyes with a light hand.

“Still,” she resumed, in a tone as though she regretted a little her victory, “you’ll go to see her. . . . You’ll go one day a week. . . .”

“Nour al-Ein, my angel,” answered al-Zaki, “how much goodness your little heart contains !”

## XI

### SHEIK AL-ZAKI'S LIBRARY

**A**T the request of Nour al-Ein, who wanted to be rid of all surveillance, Sheik al-Zaki consented to Mabrouka's slaves following her to her new home. On the day set for the departure of the elder wife he excused himself from his students of al-Azar. He went from room to room, speaking to the porters, scolding the negresses whom he found too slow at their work. Divans, rugs, kitchen utensils were piling up in the courtyard. He leaned out of the window and called to Khalil the porter, who was contemplating this disorder with great melancholy eyes.

"Why are you sitting there doing nothing? Help the others!"

It seemed to him that all these people were conspiring to prolong Mabrouka's stay under his roof. "I want her installed this evening, before sundown," he thought. "I want it!" He did not seek to understand the cause of his impatience, he did not think of the cruelty in it. His one desire was to infuse his fever into every arm, into every muscle that was working too lazily for him. When he met Nour al-Ein he turned away from her. It seemed to him that the slightest distraction would retard the departure. It was for her, it was for her love that the bodies of all these men streamed with sweat. But she should wait until the house had regained its calm and they were alone.

Stout Mabrouka furtively wiped her eyes. He approached her and questioned her in a rough voice.

"Have you got your things together? You haven't forgotten anything?"

"No, nothing . . ." softly answered the old wife.

"The jewellery ? The cashmeres ?"

"Everything is packed, master. . . . Don't trouble yourself. . . ."

At times he surprised a sorrowful expression on Mabrouka's face. He would take her amiably by the arm and gaily say : "Your house is pretty. . . . Plants are growing in profusion in the garden. You'll live there quietly, happily. . . . Above all, if there is anything you want, don't hesitate to let me know. . . . I will give you money, slaves, stuffs, as much as you want ! And don't forget that I will go to see you every week. . . ."

He almost exclaimed : "Rejoice ! Why do you answer me with so mournful a smile ? Why are you sad in the midst of joy ?" For this man, who had meditated so much on human suffering, was so insensible as to believe that nothing stood in the way of Mabrouka's happiness, and that her departure after twenty-five years of conjugal life as a respectful and peaceful wife should gladden her, since it contented the frail and pure soul of Nour al-Ein, devoured with jealousy.

And so Mabrouka left. To the porter who had humbly kissed her hand she had given a gold piece and her blessing. A crowd of beggars, cripples, blind men, lepers, had waited for her in the street. To all she had been kind and generous. Then, mounted on her donkey and preceded by Sheik al-Zaki, who, out of deference, had insisted on accompanying her, she had left the fireside to which brides bring their virginity, but where they are never sure to die.

That very evening, by the way Nour al-Ein abandoned herself, Sheik al-Zaki understood that he had accomplished an indispensable thing. He could see in Mabrouka's leaving but the material fact of a departure.

Blinded by his passion he was altogether in the hands



of his young wife. To enslave him completely, Nour al-Ein was careful to hide her elation. Girlish, singing and naïve, always naïve, she fed her husband's illusion that she was the slave of his whims. As in fact the sheik treated her always with gentleness, the better to convince her that it was from him alone that she received all her joys and all her sorrows, she attributed to him imaginary misdeeds. Surprised at first, al-Zaki was not long in realising that she was sensitive to the point of being wounded by a trifle. He reproached himself for his lack of insight, the coarseness of his masculine nature, and, doubtful of himself, he redoubled his caution and his attentive care.

Under Nour al-Ein's influence al-Zaki's intellectual complexion had been modified. His amorous satisfaction gave him an assurance from which he now judged everything ironically. It was in this state of mind that he continued his intercourse with Goha and Waddah Alysum. Indulgent toward error, he would develop a thesis with a show of sincerity and immediately afterward develop the contrary thesis and make subtle fun of Alysum, who, having applauded the one, applauded the other. Even in this form controversy bored him. Anecdotes were much oftener on the scholar's lips, to the detriment of politics and philosophy.

Although faithful to his master, Alysum maintained a constrained and false attitude. Warda, a week after Mabrouka's departure, had stopped him near the door of his palace, and drawing him aside :

"First of all," she had said, "give me a handful of sequins, for you are the happiest of men."

"What news do you bring me, aunt?" he had asked, counting six sequins into the dallala's hand.

"Ah! My dear, you are as good as you are beautiful."

"Speak quickly!"

“What good to speak quickly? If I name the one who loves you, could you see her at that instant?”

“Allah! You are unbearable!”

“I can't compromise a woman in two minutes. I need time, I must sound your thoughts. . . . This woman desires one thing only—to see you and talk to you; that is all, I swear to you by this eye, as precious to me as my life!”

“Here are two more sequins. . . .”

“Then I can talk to you. . . . She who loves you is the most beautiful of creatures. White as a tuberosé, supple as a willow, light as a bird. . . .”

“I'll see all that for myself; tell me her name. . . .”

“When she speaks it is like a fine golden embroidery——”

“Her name?”

“Nour al-Ein. . . .”

“Which?”

“The wife of Sheik al-Zaki.”

“Ah!”

She caught his disappointment and exclaimed:

“You are not satisfied? Isn't the mistress I offer you worthy of you? You are the most accomplished of men, and she is the most accomplished of women. . . . And so virtuous!”

“Very well. We'll speak of it again.”

“Alysum,” Warda had said, “perhaps you hoped it was another woman? I am devoted to you like a mother. If you love another, I'll go and speak to her for you.”

“No, no. . . . Come back in a little while. . . .”

“Remember what I told you: never will you find a quail so plump, so pretty, so loving. . . .”

As to Nour al-Ein's beauty Alysum knew where he stood: the most jealous women admired the daughter of Abd al-Rahman; but he had hesitated because of his

attachment to his spiritual mentor. His friends, Mokawa Kendi and Akr Zaid Tai, had been of the opinion that he must choose either the woman or the lessons of al-Zaki. "The two together would scarcely be honourable," they had concluded.

"And Inje Hanem ? "

"I don't love her any more."

"Then, in your place, I would choose Nour al-Ein. . . . A pretty woman is more rare than a good master."

Alysum chose to deny himself this liaison. He charged Warda with friendly words for her mistress, and gave as reason for his refusal the respect he had for the sheik.

The meetings in the library were not interrupted. Alysum brought less frankness to them, however. He felt no satisfaction in having done his duty, and did not dream of despising Nour al-Ein for her move. He lacked a taste for sacrifice. By a strange aberration he had a vague feeling that his host had done him a great wrong, for which he awaited amends. And a dull, physical antipathy awoke in him as soon as his master ceased to dominate him mentally.

Of the three, Goha was the only one who remained unchanged. Irregular in his visits, he did not let three days go by, however, without returning to the house of his neighbour, whose gentleness of speech, whose divans and whose aromatic coffee he appreciated. At times a word would catch his attention, but oftenest he was absent and dumb. Al-Zaki, interested by his unusual nature, noted his reflections and his silences. To Waddah Alysum he read carefully lettered pages. The door might open and Goha enter, and the sheik, after having welcomed him, would continue to make his observations. Besides, the talk was extremely varied and easily shifted.

This evening al-Zaki was showing precious stones.

"I bought these fifteen pearls from some Bedouins,

who doubtless had stolen them from fishermen on the shores of the Red Sea."

"And these big diamonds?" asked Alysum.

"They are from Panna."

"The biggest is cut in facets. . . ."

"By a Venetian artisan, I think. . . . Look at these two rubies of Ceylon, the island of rubies, as Balad Huri calls it. They are scarlet and pure. . . ."

"You have a fortune in that casket."

"Does it astonish you? Could it be that you, so noble a spirit, have not the passion for precious stones? I never read the description of Selar's jewels without feeling myself moved to tears. . . . Selar was the lieutenant of Bibars, the Egyptian Emir. When al-Naser seized the throne he took possession of Selar's treasures. . . . I'll show you the inventory. . . ."

Al-Zaki rose and took down a manuscript in his own hand.

"Four pounds of Indian rubies and balas rubies. . . ."

"The kind that are found in Egypt, in the neighbourhood of Thora, aren't they?"

"They are also found at Alabanda. . . . I continue: Nineteen pounds of emeralds; three hundred large diamonds and cat's-eyes; two pounds of assorted fine stones; one thousand one hundred and fifty round pearls, the weight of each varying between one grain and one *mithcal*; one million four hundred thousand *dinars* of minted gold; one basin of gold; an innumerable quantity of purses filled with gold, found in a hiding-place; two million seventy-one thousand *dirhems*; four hundred-weight of pieces of jewellery. . . ."

"Are you sure of those figures?" asked Alysum.

"Without counting," continued al-Zaki, "the stuffs, the rugs, horses, mamelukes, women, buildings. . . . There you are. You hesitate to believe? I myself copied

this inventory from the original. . . . Do not judge Egypt by what you see to-day. . . . Cairo rivalled in wealth the Bagdad of Haroun al-Rashid and, in my opinion, surpassed it. I see you are not convinced. You are like the vizier's son. . . . But perhaps you know the story ? ”

“ I don't think I know the anecdote to which you refer, father.”

“ I will tell it to you : A vizier had been imprisoned with his son for many years. One day the child asked his father what kind of meat they were eating. ‘ It is the flesh of the ox,’ answered the fallen vizier and, with many details, he described the animal. ‘ Ah ! I understand ! ’ exclaimed the child. ‘ What you call an ox must be like a rat, eh, father ? ’ You are like him, Alysum. Seeing only rats in your cell you liken to them all the beasts of creation.”

“ There's a great difference between a rat and an ox,” remarked Goha, nodding his head.

Sheik al-Zaki possessed a Koran of inestimable value. It was inscribed on parchment in Kufic characters by the hand of Abu Abd Allah al-Hassan ibn Ali, one of the most famous of Moslem scribes, who lived in the sixth century of the Hegira. The pages were inscribed upon a field of gold. The reverse of each page was decorated with a rose design. A plaque of carved ivory was set into the binding.

“ Is this the book so often spoken of at the university ? ” asked Alysum, as he handled the precious volume and noted, at the sheik's indication, the perfection of the work. “ It is said it comes to you from your ancestor Wali Bedr. . . . ”

“ That is true. . . . My ancestor received it from al-Mostanser, the Fatimite sultan. . . . ”

“ Allah ! ” exclaimed Alysum, reverently touching the



binding. "That makes seven centuries ! And what was the relation between al-Mostanser and Wali Bedr ? "

"You will qualify it yourself, when you know its origin. The year 462 of the Hegira was marked in Egypt by a frightful famine, whose horrors our historian, Abou al-Fida, has described for us. Sultan al-Mostanser was at that time in extreme poverty. The Turkish militia had reduced him to impotence. He lived that year, 462, on the bounty of an old woman and of my ancestor. . . ."

"Al-Mostanser in such distress !"

"His long reign included glorious years and wretched ones. . . . The bloody quarrels between his Turkish and his Negro militia, unfortunate wars, the need to seek the aid of foreign princes to ensure peace within his kingdom, a defective administration due to the frequent changing of his viziers, all that had weakened him extraordinarily. And then this famine. . . ."

"I have heard tell of it. . . . It seems that the fellahs formed bands and howled around the palace. A vizier, I have been told, was torn from his mule, which was devoured before his eyes. . . ."

"What you don't know, perhaps, is that the guilty were executed and that the people were allowed to eat their bodies. . . ."

"Is that humanly possible ? " exclaimed Waddah Alysum with a grimace.

"A well-fed person like you," quietly answered al-Zaki, "can scarcely judge the acts of a starving man. . . . Besides, there was worse than that. . . . Children who strayed from their homes disappeared for ever. . . . Women no longer went to the Nile to wash their linen and fill their jars with water. . . . Men went armed with cudgels as much to defend themselves as to attack a problematical prey. . . . It is reported that an imprudent



woman was partly eaten by fellahs, who tore her arms, her thighs and her breasts with their teeth. Rescued at last, she was able to survive that butchery. . . . It was talked about for a long time, and people came to see her as an object of curiosity. . . .”

Goha was laughing heartily, and Alysum, unnerved by the calm tone of the speaker, could not restrain a movement of impatience.

“You tell me these things as though they were ordinary occurrences . . .” he said, addressing the sheik. “You are tolerant; you smile. . . . I confess I shudder !”

“Is not hunger natural ?” asked Sheik al-Zaki.

Alysum did not answer. He found the sheik’s attitude less cynical than idiotic. This sign of weakness pleased him, for it helped him to shake off the intellectual yoke that irked him since Nour al-Ein’s advances.

But suddenly Sheik al-Zaki’s voice became grave.

“Do not judge, my son,” he said. “Do not shudder. . . . You have the right to judge others only if you suffer as they, for morality is the slave of necessity, at least when this necessity has a universal character. . . . You are young. When experience of life has blunted your passions, you will not shudder; you will try to understand. The philosophers, and Avicenna in particular, teach us that it is not in pity but in a rational understanding of human suffering that love of others resides. That is what my remark meant, my son.”

Alysum’s resentment, intimidated at first, gave way before the power of this ardent speech that veiled a reproach with so much dignity.

“Father,” he exclaimed, “don’t hold it against me !”

“And why should I ?” answered the sheik, with aloof kindness. “If you are in error, am I not your master to help you ?”

Having dominated his pupil, he hastened to resume his easy tone, careful however to maintain his prestige.

"How many manuscripts do you possess, father?" asked Alysum.

"Nearly three thousand; I might have had more, had not an adventure overtaken the same Wali Bedr of whom we were just speaking. Wali Bedr was born in Tunis, and it was when he was forty that he came to Egypt. He had brought many valuable works, marvellously bound by Byzantine artisans. . . . On the way the caravan was attacked by Bedouins, and among the things that fell into their possession were precisely these books. . . ."

"Meagre booty for looters. . . ."

"They made what they could of it. Three years later, Wali Bedr found himself obliged to spend some days in Tunis. On the way he met at an oasis some Bedouins who received him amicably. . . . But the thing about them that most attracted his attention was their babouches. They were of calfskin, sheepskin, morocco; red, black, green, yellow, white. Veined with gold and decorated with rose designs or stars in relief, the babouches of these noble children of the desert were sumptuous. . . . It took Wali Bedr only a second to recognise their origin. . . . They were the bindings of his precious manuscripts."

A Berber slave entered. He lit five oil lamps hanging from the ceiling by gold chains, and went out backward. Al-Zaki spoke of Averroes, Avicenna, of the Jew Moses Maimonides, whose works he possessed. Then he passed on to others less illustrious.

"Here," he said, "is an admirable novel. . . . It was written in the fourth century of the Hegira, by Ibn al-Tufail, and its title is *Hayy ibn Yakzan*. Hayy, the hero of the book, lives on a desert island in company with a goat that feeds him. Abandoned since early childhood, he has had no communication with men. Nevertheless, little

by little the sight of the world around him inculcates in him certain concepts. He even reaches the elementary inductions from the study of plants, the sky and all the natural phenomena he witnesses. Within himself he finds the complement of his observations, so that after innumerable discoveries he arrives at last at a knowledge of God. . . .”

“O Nabi !” said Alysum. “Will you allow me to take that novel ?”

“I strongly urge you to,” answered al-Zaki. “That copy is very imperfect. It is full of errors, especially as to the diacritical marks, but you will be pleased with your reading. When you have finished it, I will lend you some historical works that you should know : *The Conquest of Countries*, by Balad Huri, for instance, or *The Chronicles of Saladin*, by Baha al-Din, or again, *The Fields of Gold*, by the prodigious Maç-ou-di. . . .”

With an amused eye Goha was watching a hawk-moth tracing giddy circles around a lamp. It brushed the burning glass, hesitated, resumed its flight. Suddenly it threw itself into the flame and fell back with folded wings.

“Poor thing, of what strange passions have you been victim ?” murmured the master.

With careful fingers he picked up the injured insect.

“If it could speak, what would it say ?”

“It would say, ‘I am suffering,’” answered Alysum.

“No, it is anger that it would express, rather than suffering. . . . For it that lamp has a name, Fate. Its folly it calls Misfortune.”

“But it does not speak,” observed Goha.

He had the art of solving the most vexing problems with rapid epilogues, and before so much simplicity his learned companions hesitated to pursue their subtle discourses. Often Sheik al-Zaki summarised for Goha

the substance of certain books. Goha listened without altogether understanding; images appeared, strange, fantastic. . . . He thought that in these volumes one witnessed moving lives, one saw battles joined, angels fly, and he would exclaim enthusiastically :

“Glory to God !”

As the story advanced he would lose himself in an intoxication of colours, of action. . . . From each book streamed slow files of men, women, camels and formidable beasts. . . . The walls retreated to permit the marvellous fantasies to spread. . . . He saw — he only saw and heard. Metaphors had shapes, sounds, colours . . . and all this was real, and all this was alive. He knew that astrologers were men who carried in the palm of their immense hands, like a handful of jewels, the stars of the firmament; he knew that Antar swallowed mountains, dug with one stroke of his lance bottomless pits in the ground to swallow up his enemies; he knew that alchemists were an order of beings living in flames and feeding on molten metal. By the poet's description, he understood that lovers were extraordinary animals with eyes as big as the moon, the legs of gazelles, torsos of willow, who sang in the shade of oases or on the borders of rivers. One evening, in a palm grove, he thought he recognised one of these creatures.

Such were the dazzling visions that crowded before Goha when his learned friend spoke . . . then all the images whirled around, mingled, were dissipated; the walls drew in.

“They have gone back into the books !” Goha would exclaim. “They have gone back into the books ! I want to see. . . .”

He would take the miraculous volumes with feverish hands and remain in consternation, like a beaten dog, before the page dotted with dark points.

“I knew very well,” he would murmur, “that book was too small to contain all that.”

At times, however, in the midst of a story, his gaiety, his emotion fell suddenly, his face resumed its usual calm, his spirit its passivity. A fly in intricate flight, a clumsy bat would absorb him. Retaken by life, he no longer heard Sheik al-Zaki, and would rise to lean on the window-sill or go out.

## XII

### THE TALISMANS

ON a rug near the divan Nour al-Ein and Amina her slave played at jacks. Each had one leg folded under her and the other stretched out. Their bare feet, arched alike, were loaded with heavy bracelets. Each movement of their bodies was reflected in their clearly detached and extremely mobile big toes. The jacks were of ivory. Nour al-Ein and Amina were enjoying the game, laughing so much that their eyes were full of tears and at every moment they had to retie the *mandils* on their heads.

“Your turn, Amina.”

Fingers advanced, gathered up the jacks, tossed them into the air.

“Three!” exclaimed the slave, showing the back of her hand where three jacks had fallen.

“I tell you you are the cleverer.”

“Play . . . play. . . . You’ll get four, I’m sure of it.”

Nour al-Ein tossed the jacks to a slight height, straightened out her hand. Only two fell on the outspread fingers. She made a quick movement to catch the others and the ones she had caught escaped.

“Oh! . . . Oh! . . . Nothing! . . . I don’t want to play any more.” The five ivory jacks lay on the rug.

“You had two of them,” reproached Amina.

“Yes, I had two and you were jealous. You threw me the evil eye. . . .”

“Begin again. . . .”

“Then turn your head . . . don’t look at me.”

“No . . . no. . . . I want to see you. . . .”



As they talked, they laughed uproariously. Laughter bent their supple bodies and shook the breasts they supported with their arms.

"Let's go! . . . It's your turn," exclaimed Amina.

One single jack remained on Nour al-Ein's hand, and the two women's gaiety increased. Attracted by the noise, Yasmine appeared at the door. She withdrew, swinging her hips. Then old Mirmah came. The wrinkles in her face twitched with a thousand little smiles. She advanced, a little bent, gaunt, stiff-legged, with arms out, happy to hear laughter from her young mistress who had not laughed for so long.

"Try again," said Amina joyously.

Meanwhile Nour al-Ein's lips had hardened. She took the jacks, threw them in the air—all five fell on the rug. Many times she repeated the motion, thinking, "Three. . . . I must have three. . . . Then Alysum will love me. . . ." She raged at the game with growing anger. Amina looked with dismay at the ugly line that dug itself between her eyebrows, and old Mirmah, undeceived by her mistress's persistent smile, said in a gentle motherly voice:

"Rest yourself, darling. . . . You are tiring yourself, I swear it. . . ."

"Hold your tongue!" Nour al-Ein interrupted in a passion.

"I must have three of them," she thought, "and Alysum is mine. . . . Oh! I'll get them!" Without even thinking of what she was doing, she threw the jacks recklessly, two, one, four a time, at random.

"I want three of them, three, three. . . . Go to the devil!" And violently she hurled them to the end of the room.

"Leave me alone," she said roughly to the two slaves, who were trying to console her.

"It's my fault," said Amina. "You were playing so well, and I gave you the evil eye. . . ."

"Enough! . . . Tell me if Warda is coming to-day. . . ."

"Yes, I think so."

"'I think so!' . . . What does it matter to me what you think? . . . Are you sure of it?"

"She will come," said Mirmah.

"She'll come. . . . How do you know?"

Nour al-Ein lay on the divan. Since Mabrouka's departure she could sleep to the pattering of the jet of water rising in the middle of the room without being disturbed, she could dip her feet into the goldfish basin, she could play with Amina, listen to the stories old Mirmah told and dance with Yasmine; but she was not happy.

"Do you want to eat some melon seeds?" asked Mirmah, placing the tips of her hard fingers on Nour al-Ein's arm. "I've just toasted some."

"No. I don't want any."

And Nour al-Ein remembered the day the dallala, with a thousand precautions, had reported Alysum's refusal. "He doesn't want to!" she had exclaimed, shaking Warda by the shoulders. "Go away from here, viper! Who gave you permission to propose me to that dog? Go away!" Since then one moon had passed and another was in its first quarter. Prodigies of tact, heaps of praises had restored the dallala's prestige. The woman's advice was necessary to Nour al-Ein, for Alysum's refusal had goaded her desire.

"He hasn't seen you," Warda invariably repeated. "A description is not enough to win a heart: show yourself! . . . This lord loves a Turkish lady of high rank. It is only by showing yourself that you can make him forget her. . . . And he will forget her, my dear; he'll forget her as soon as he has seen you."

Nour al-Ein had come to blame her failure on the residue of modesty that survived in her. From then on she was ready for any boldness. Despite the handclapping that announced the presence of a man in the house, she one day allowed herself to be surprised without a veil in the antechamber. Alysum had turned away his head. The next day, as the young man passed, she threw a silver spoon into the court.

These means had brought no result. Warda had not been discouraged. She knew a fifty-year-old student of the University of al-Azar whose pious perseverance in the study of sacred writings had won him favour with the invisible genii. She had obtained from him an infallible talisman for arousing love.

"With this talisman," Warda had declared, "you will see him at your feet. As soon as Alysum puts his foot on it he will love you. In his dreams he will see nothing but you; when he awakes he will have the illusion that you are just fleeing his room. His house will be filled with voices like yours. . . . His lips will burn, and he will become thin as an ox after two years of drought. . . . Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"I must enter his palace, loosen a tile and replace it so nothing will be noticed."

"Well, do it!"

"I have to win over the slaves. . . . I need money, much money."

The talisman had been in place for more than a week and Nour al-Ein had anxiously awaited the issue of the undertaking. The day before and for three days before that Alysum had not appeared, and she lost herself in conjectures.

She was drawn from these thoughts by the call to the faithful.

"Noon," she murmured.

She half-opened her eyelids, and the sheen of the multi-coloured windows and the porcelain dazzled her.

"Here is your *sajada*," said Amina, spreading on the marble the rug her mistress reserved for prayers.

Nour al-Ein rose and, with Mirmah, made her ablutions in the basin. Then she went to her rug. The three women, standing apart, were hushed a moment, motionless and erect. Then they raised the hand to a level with the face to pronounce the words of the faith: "God is great." Having recited the first chapter of the Koran they bent, knelt, prostrated themselves twice, rose and bent, knelt and prostrated themselves again in token of humility while the voice of the muezzins fell from the minarets to the north, the south, the east and the west.

"Here I am," said Warda, entering as Nour al-Ein ended her prayer.

"Sit down and tell me. Quick! Quick!"

The dallala squatted with difficulty, and her fat body spread on the floor like an enormous half-inflated bladder. She lowered one eyelid so as she would be invited to speak, and wiped the other one, that oozed.

"You have some news, Warda?"

The dallala smiled and leaned toward Nour al-Ein.

"He loves you," she said.

Nour al-Ein put a finger on her lips and signed to speak lower.

"He loves you," Warda repeated, winking.

"How do you know?"

"Don't ask me how I know. . . . Did he come yesterday?"

"No. . . ."

"The day before yesterday?"

"He hasn't come for four days."

Warda tapped Nour al-Ein's shoulder with a satisfied air:

"It was inevitable. He isn't sure of himself. My talisman is infallible."

"What is there to do now?"

"My daughter, you may sleep on my back. . . . I am awake; I watch everything and I arrange everything."

Aided by Amina, the dallala rose, went out, and returned with her bale of merchandise, which she had left behind the arcades. She drew from it a coffee-cup.

"Listen to me," she said. "He loves you. Now, he has to come to you and then . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! You understand me well. . . . Ah! How beautiful you will be, you two!"

And the dallala applied a sonorous kiss to the ends of her fingers.

"To-morrow he will come to visit your husband. . . . He will be offered coffee. . . . Well, look at this cup."

Nour al-Ein took the gilded cup in her slender fingers and examined it minutely. It was decorated inside with writings and cabalistic signs.

"Listen to me," resumed Warda. "He must drink his coffee in that."

"What is written in the bottom?"

"Ask me nothing if you want love. . . . He must drink his coffee in that; I know nothing else."

She turned to Amina.

"Come here!" she commanded. "Sit down in front of me. . . . Listen and understand. . . . You see this cup? . . . Yes. . . . Good. . . . When you make coffee for——"

"I never make it. . . . Mirmah! . . . Come here, Mirmah!"

The old slave approached, squatted and turned intelligent eyes to Warda. The latter, after having shown her the cup and adjured her to lend all her attention, said:

"You will pour the coffee while saying, 'Nour al-Ein,

Waddah Alysum, Nour al-Ein, Waddah Alysum,' three times. . . . And now I know two pigeons who are going to be happy ! ”

“ God grant it ! ” murmured Mirmah.

“ God grant it ! ” repeated Amina and the dallala in chorus.

A little slave entered the room with a tray set with grilled meats, white cheese and salt fish.

The dallala was invited to the meal and showed herself as gay as she was greedy. Having eaten, and drunk Nile water out of the pitcher, she hugged Nour al-Ein to her flabby breasts and at last withdrew with her heavy step, accompanied by the slaves.

Left alone, the young woman, stretched out, amused herself studying the arabesques on the walls. She endeavoured to follow a line in the intricate design, and lost herself at every attempt. Then, little by little, she felt her brain grow heavy. The intricate lines became confused. She closed her eyes.



## XIII

### AROUND A DEAD MAN

*O night ! O night ! O night !*

*O my night !*

*O night ! O night ! O night !*

**K**HALIL the old porter was singing an amorous plaint. Squatted against a banana-tree in the courtyard, he raised to heaven his ecstatic eyes. At this voice that spoke so well to her heart Nour Al-Ein, eyes closed, felt her strength abandon her.

When the song ended she remained inert.

The buzzing of insects, the noise of bare feet on the tiles, the muffled cries of the slaves sustained her torpor. Footsteps drew near. She felt a face bend over hers and eyes scrutinising her insistently. Her eyelids half opened, as though they alone were alive.

She was frightened at the sight of an enormous mass of hairy flesh above her head.

“Sleep on. . . . I did not want to waken you. . . .”

She recognised al-Zaki's voice. He straightened up. She was able to consider him at leisure. What did this man want of her ? Everything about him was ridiculous : the ends of ears escaping from his turban, his mouth, from which fell words she did not understand, his mobile wrinkles that continually modified the pattern of his face. She lingered complacently over the nose that advanced toward her. Never before had she noticed how big it was, and how rough was its skin.

“Why are you silent ?”

Nour al-Ein was not listening. Having inventoried

this man's features, she looked at him calmly now and thought she might as well pierce his heart with a dagger.

"I have a great sorrow this evening," resumed al-Zaki, seating himself on the divan. "And you—could you be suffering?"

He added, pursuing his first thought:

"Allah is great! He ordains destinies. . . ."

"What does his grief matter to me?" Nour al-Ein thought. "Does he even suspect that I am suffering too, and through his fault? Warda assures me I'll have Alysum, she swears he loves me. . . . What wouldn't I give to know if it's true!"

"I see, darling, that you are as sad as I am," said al-Zaki.

"Ah, how these unctuous sentences exasperate me!" thought Nour al-Ein. But a thought came to her that gave her a malicious joy. "I love Alysum," she told herself, "and you don't know it. . . . He is here, on my bed. . . . I embrace him, he clasps me in his arms, and you don't know it. . . . You may be very intelligent, but I am deceiving you right under your enormous nose. . . ."

To hide her smile she bent over the rug, looking for her velvet mules.

"Have you visited Mabrouka?" she asked.

"Yesterday. . . ."

"Is she pleased with her little house?"

"I think so. . . . She asked me about you."

Nour al-Ein slipped her feet into the mules and, raising her dress, slowly rubbed her knees.

"I am sore there, in the bones," she said.

"Tell Mirmah to rub you with hot oil," answered al-Zaki.

He re-covered the legs of the young woman, who was surprised at this prudish gesture. He continued:

"I must tell you my sorrow, darling. . . . I have lost my friend, my best friend. . . . I loved him like a brother, and death has taken him away. . . ."

"One of your colleagues of al-Azar?"

"No, a pupil. . . . He often came here, almost every day. . . ."

Nour al-Ein felt as if an iron hand had come down upon her skull. The sentence had passed before her eyes, her eyes had seen it, endowed with prodigious clarity. She wanted to divert the misfortune that was falling on her, by words, by signs, with the crazy thought that misfortune, stunned, would desert the threshold it was about to cross.

"I guess: it is Saleh al-Benna. . . . He leaves three very young children. . . . Ah! the poor little ones! . . . No! It isn't him? Then . . . then it's Ahmed Abou Zaid? They are all sickly in that family. . . ."

Sheik al-Zaki interrupted her:

"It is neither the one nor the other. Why do you name al-Benna and Abou Zaid? They are neither old, nor sick, nor wicked that you should think of them in this connection. How can one guess the intimate secret will of Allah?"

He paused, and in a gentle voice resumed:

"The man I mourn, my dear, was named Waddah Alysum. . . . He was young and beautiful. . . . He was found drowned, his body in a sack, bound hand and foot. . . . The Nile cast him up on the bank. . . . He must have been dead two or three days. . . . It was difficult to recognise him, he was swollen like a water-skin. . . ."

At these details she made a gesture of repulsion, and when she understood that for three days she had loved a corpse she shuddered with horror. The arms so passionately and vainly desired, she felt them tighten around her now.

"It is the climax of a gallant adventure," continued al-Zaki. "It is said he was abandoning his mistress and that to avenge herself she had him thrown into the river by her slaves."

"May God receive Him into His hands!" stammered Nour al-Ein.

She was livid, her temples were wet with perspiration. A gruesome mysticism had invaded her brain. A swollen water-skin—death. The image and the idea—two different aspects of a single thing. She had never thought about death, but she had vaguely believed it was the extinction of the individual in a more beautiful way. She had just learned what there was of the monstrous in it. She thought of al-Zaki, and it was almost a relief. His wrinkles, his rough nose, the mobile pattern of his face, everything in this man appeared extraordinary to her. The other was inanimate, horrible; this one lived. She saw him, she heard him breathe. So they were, she and he, of the same family of the living, and to live now seemed to her miraculous.

"I must leave you," said the sheik, rising. "Time presses. . . . The procession will pass under your window. . . . We will see each other again this evening. . . ."

A cry rose to Nour al-Ein's lips: "Don't desert me! I am afraid!" Near this man who could move so freely and who, in contact with death, retained his customary assurance, she felt protected. He moved away and Nour al-Ein saw him go out with terror. She looked around the room. The ceiling, the walls seemed to her at a dizzy distance. She thought herself irremediably alone.

"Mirmah! . . . Amina! . . . Amina! . . ."

The Syrian and the Circassian came running.

"Amina! . . . Mirmah! . . . Where were you?"

"We were sitting at the door. . . ."

"Come to the divan. . . ."

"We heard," said Amina, patting her mistress's hand.

"Don't be sad."

"Do you want me to tell you a story ? " asked Mirmah.

"I'll tell you the story of Melek."

"No . . . no. . . ."

"Don't be sad," continued Amina. "Choose another. . . . There are thousands who will be able to comfort you."

Through the panes violet gleams spread into the room, and shadows gathered in the corners. The furniture, the friezes on the walls, that until then Nour al-Ein had known to be inert, became animated, and seemed to be awaiting something. That advancing shadow, was it going to carry her away perhaps ? For the first time she felt a mystery in things. The two slaves were at her feet. She saw them as though from another world. The Circassian was crouched, head on her hand. The Syrian was crouched, head on her hand. They were small, small as children, and light as smoke. Submissive, too, to forces that consume, they were visibly dwindling.

Little by little noises rise. They do not come from far, but they come from an unknown direction. Amina and Mirmah raise their heads and say they have heard.

*"La Allah ella Allah ! . . . Mohammed rassoul Allah ! . . ."*

The two slaves move and seem to grow.

*"There is no other God but God ! . . . Mohammed is the Prophet of God !"*

The women turn to Nour al-Ein.

"Come and see. . . . The cortège is passing."

"Let's go to the window."

Rumours become definite. It is lighter.

"Let's go to the window. . . . Come and see. . . ."

She walks. Through the lattice she glimpses the street

teeming with hundreds of moving beings. Light reddens the crowd and the walls. It is the setting sun, but Nour al-Ein is dazzled. Men shout, women shout, and Nour al-Ein, who is not yet in immediate contact with life, thinks that the light is interposed between herself and the clamour.

*"There is no other God but God! . . . Mohammed is the Prophet of God!"*

"Here are the blind and the beggars," says Mirmah.

"Ah! . . . Poor thing! O you who wore pretty shoes and pretty clothes!" says Amina.

"Ah! . . . Who will wear your pretty shoes?"

"Here is the coffin."

"Sheik al-Zaki. . . . He is helping to carry the coffin."

"I see two young men with veiled faces. They are the dead man's friends. How sad they look and what beautiful bodies they have!"

"One is called Mokawa Kendi and the other is called Akr Zaid Tai."

"Oh! how many weepers! . . . And their hair, look how it is covered with ashes!"

Nour al-Ein is without thought. Nevertheless, slowly, the variegated crowd captures her attention. The terror passes. She watches curiously the spectacle unrolling beneath her window. The casket in which are the remains of Alysum is no different from the other caskets that so often have traversed the streets of Cairo, preceded by a band of weepers. A funeral like all the others. . . . This familiar scene quiets her, for she expected a horrible revelation of death. Then the memory of her scorned beauty returns to her.

"Go! go!" she says. "Go into the earth, you who rejected me!"

These words make her weep. Her emotion is no longer panic, and it is not sorrow. . . . It is a small fugitive



emotion in which is less of regret than of satisfaction. No danger threatens her. The corpse will be placed on the sand, in a tomb ; but she—she will live on.

“ Go into the earth, you who rejected me ! ”

She thinks of the talisman that was to have united her to Waddah Alysum in a single love, a single fate. If the effect of the writing should persist ! Quickly, quickly, let it be taken away and let everything between them be broken.

“ Rend your veils, mourners, rend your veils ! . . . ” cries Mirmah, striking her breasts.

“ You had houses and gardens. . . . We have taken you from your bed to put you in a box. . . . But let not your spirit grieve, we have wrapped your body in cashmere shawls,” says Amina.

## XIV

### THE SACRILEGE

**A**N extraordinary thing had happened in the street. Before Haj Mahmoud's house a man was laughing, fists on his hips, legs apart.

Goha did not believe in his friend's death. In the solemnity of the crowd, the funeral chants, the despair of the weepers, he saw the various phases of that enormous farce, the funeral of a living person. The scandal became such that a white-bearded sheik and two students of al-Azar came to him and addressed him roughly.

"I do not know who you are," said the sheik, "but I perceive that you have no tact."

"I have a great deal of tact," retorted Goha, his face beaming. "And tact in your mother's eye! . . . and tact in your sister's eye! . . ."

The sonority of this word he did not understand amused him and incited him to witticism.

"Since you are not capable of respecting a dead man," continued the sheik.

Goha interrupted him :

"A dead man . . . what dead man ? " he said scornfully.

Sure of his fact, he suddenly felt a passion for argument, and the certainty that he was going to confound a venerable sheik, perhaps an illustrious one, filled him with insolent joy.

"What dead man ? " he resumed after a pause. Without being conscious of it he was imitating the manner of Sheik al-Zaki, when the philosopher was in discussion ; he went so far as to borrow his voice and that peculiar

manner of raising the eyebrows while lightly leaning the head to one side. "Waddah Alysum isn't dead. . . . Reject, my dear friend, these fables that circulate without anyone knowing their source. He isn't dead—Waddah ; you can believe him who saw him this very morning in his room . . ."

He stopped. Then, in a triumphant voice, like the fall of a blow :

"He was on his bed, in flesh and bone !"

While the old man fumed, Goha nodded his head and began to drone in a confident voice :

*"It is I who tell you. . . .  
I saw him on his bed. . . .  
Yes, Waddah Alysum . . .  
in flesh and bone."*

In the crowd people shouted, "For shame ! Make him stop !" The sheik moved away, murmuring, "Allah forgive him, he's an idiot." But Goha did not see it so. He felt the old man was fleeing from his arguments. He pulled him by the arm.

"Are you dead, you ?" he shouted, red with anger. "If Waddah Alysum is dead, you too, I tell you, you are dead ! . . . Me too, I tell you, I am dead ! . . . And everybody, everybody is dead !"

Fixedly, avidly, forehead pressed against the lattice, Nour al-Ein watched the man whom a coffin made gay. The cries of the weepers prevented her from following the scene. She realised, however, that Goha alone was holding up the crowd. Old men and students surrounded him. But their talking was in vain ; Goha was unmanageable, and they left with gestures of despair. Nour al-Ein contemplated the handsome shoulders of the hero. More even than his laugh, his powerful neck, his muscled arms, the magnificent health that radiated from his body

detached him from the dreary and stupid mob. She compared him to Waddah Alysum, to Sheik al-Zaki. . . . Alysum was no more than an inert thing, vanquished by death; al-Zaki followed the coffin, shoulders bowed, himself also defeated by death. In Goha life had taken its stand. . . . How secure one would feel in his arms !

“ You will no longer dip your lips in our cups,” said Amina, addressing the dead man.

“ You will cross no more the threshold of nuptial chambers,” said Mirmah.

The procession had entered the narrow lane that led to the necropolis. The chant of the blind was subsiding.

“ You are going away ! You are going away ! . . .” resumed Amina. “ Ah ! If I could choose a bride for you !”

Goha was now alone. He watched the last cartful of weepers pass, and shrugged his shoulders to express his profound astonishment at the absurdity of his fellow-men. The argument he had just gone through had put a fever in his brain. He had a feeling that at this moment he resembled Sheik al-Zaki, Waddah Alysum and all the young men of the élite whose fascination he had so often felt without understanding.

“ It is evident that . . . Do you not think, dear master ? . . . But, my son, we must consider . . .”

With measured gestures he declaimed these fragments of sentences, reminiscences of long conversations in the library, and he was happy; he felt himself intelligent.

Nour al-Ein also admired his warm voice and the beautiful, mysterious words that now rose to her. Her heart, her arms went out to this man who could not even see her behind the dark grill of the lattice. Goha was inaccessible. She could never touch him with her hands, this being precious as the sun !

"Eh! Master, I consider. . . . Nevertheless I have the right to say . . . But, my child, come and drink a cup of coffee and smoke a narghile. . . . You are welcome in my house. . . . You are welcome wherever you put your pretty foot. . . ."

In the midst of the imaginary audience he had created especially to animate his discussion, Goha started toward Sheik al-Zaki's house. Ceremoniously he allowed his invisible companions to pass before him under the monumental entrance.

"Well!" Mirmah observed, "they are letting the son of Mahmoud come up . . ."

"You have good eyes for your age," answered Nour al-Ein mischievously.

She wrapped her scarf around her so as easily to pick up her desire-tormented body. She gained the antechamber. The head, shoulders, legs of Goha emerged. His babouches flapped on the tiles of the landing, then he disappeared behind the velvet hangings stitched with gold that screened the library.

Nour al-Ein pushed the door of the partition, crossed the antechamber, raised the heavy hangings. Goha, erect against the window, turned to her a curious and tender face. Then, laughing aloud, hair in disorder, she threw herself in his arms.

Sheik al-Zaki appeared in the entrance. Goha was stretched on the divan. Long before, Nour al-Ein had left him. He was assailed by strange visions, and his breast was filled with sweet emotions.

Surprised to find him there, Sheik al-Zaki said to him with some harshness:

"Ah! you were allowed to come up in my absence. . . ."

"I waited for you," said Goha.

"You didn't follow the coffin of your friend? I saw

you in passing, you were gay. . . . Why were you laughing ? ”

“ I was laughing at the people,” answered Goha, and his face brightened.

“ What was there amusing about them ? ”

“ They are ignorant,” Goha explained, putting his finger to his forehead. “ They say Waddah Alysum is gone.”

He spoke quietly, without thinking of al-Zaki, who was growing indignant in his grief.

“ You think Alysum is dead ! It isn’t true. The people are ignorant, and I made fun of them. . . . Alysum isn’t dead. . . . I saw him this morning in his room. . . . He was even bigger than usual.”

Thus was revealed to Sheik al-Zaki Goha’s conception of death. He thought that to die was to disappear entirely, and that one goes away body and soul at once, since one is born at once body and soul.



## XV

### AMONG THE ARABESQUES

**D**ID he go out this morning ? ”

“ Yes, I saw him go out. ”

“ He passed under the window ? ”

“ No . . . as usual, he went toward the Nile. . . . ”

“ For the past twenty days he has been going over there. . . . He stays there until evening. . . . Why ? Whom does he meet, sister ? ”

Nour al-Ein was questioning Amina. She was dressed in a green tunic, and fanned herself with a palm-leaf. The day was hot. In the middle of the room the slave dipped her legs in the basin into which tumbled a jet of water. At times a goldfish warily approached her white foot, brushed it with its nose and then with a quick movement of the tail darted away. Nour al-Ein continued :

“ And not once has he worried about me. . . . He does not even look at my window when he calls on the sheik. . . . Besides, he hasn’t come for five days. ”

She was twisting a garland of jasmines she wore around her neck. The white flowers, pierced by a silk thread, were beginning to wilt. Ibrahim the eunuch prepared one of these adornments for her every morning. The patient Sudanese enjoyed minute occupations, and he searched the garden for the most delicately perfumed flowers, to make of them fragile ornaments, necklaces, bracelets, pendants and crowns.

Amina rose. Her feet left damp prints on the tiles, then her steps were muffled in a Smyrna rug. She leaned her back for a moment against one of the columns.

“ Why do you look at me like that ? ” asked Nour

al-Ein angrily. "You find me ugly? I am ugly! I have never been anything but ugly!"

The slave laughed ostentatiously, and came and threw herself on her knees by the divan. She put her arms around Nour al-Ein and fondled her, her head resting against her rounded hip.

"Ugly? . . . The idea! . . . Who is the idiot who has seen you without dying of love? . . . You are light as a thirsty gazelle and beautiful as the morning. . . . Ah! if I were a rich man, a prince or a sultan, I would have built you a harem of marble and gold. . . . And why not?"

"You are making fun of me," said Nour al-Ein.

"God preserve me from that! I am telling you the truth! . . ."

"Then why doesn't he want me?"

Amina shrugged her shoulders. She thought such insistence unworthy of her mistress.

"You must be very kind to give him a thought. . . . Think, think, he's an idiot! . . ."

"Amina! . . . At bottom, you're right, plague take him!"

"He and the negress . . ."

"You are sure Goha sleeps with his nurse?"

"Abd Allah's cook has repeated it to me twenty times."

"Perhaps he finds her skin whiter than mine," said Nour al-Ein with a sour smile.

Through the far window, cut in a pointed arch, prismatic rays filtered into the room. The capricious design of the panes was reflected in faded tints on the tiles. Amina's leg was marked with a luminous tracery. The light from a rose window stained Nour al-Ein's dress with blood.

The heat was oppressive. The setting sun reached more and more of the room. The jet of iridescent water broke into fugitive pearls. Against the wall a panel, on which

appeared a peacock, shone with a multiplied brilliance, while shadows slipped among the pendentives that attenuated the angles of the ceiling. On the blue vase decorated with white scrolls, on the ebony stand encrusted with mother-of-pearl and copper, on the chest set with rough emeralds, on the silver lamp, on the sweet-breathed censers, everywhere appeared the same subtle tracery. Two lines cross, and here they become mingled in the cunning maze. Each follows a course immutable as fate. Here they complete a hexagon, there a star. They start from one does not know where and perpetually return upon themselves. At Nour al-Ein's passing figures take life; the rose window takes its full form and the frame of the name of Allah closes itself.

Nour al-Ein did not succeed in diverting herself from thoughts of Goha. Invaded by contradictory emotions, she passed from anger to melancholy, from scorn to humility. Since the encounter in the library Goha had made no attempt to come near her. His visits had grown rare. When he did come, Nour al-Ein, from behind the lattice, tried in vain to catch a signal. He passed, indifferent, resplendent with health, and Nour al-Ein, weeping with rage and love, swore to avenge herself. Repulsed by Alysum, forgotten by Goha, she had at times the mad fear that she was ugly or already old.

Her pride resisted any simple explanation of this abandonment. She leaped from hypothesis to hypothesis, and, not examining any, she chose none. She imagined extravagant accidents, for she wanted to convince herself that Goha had not kept away from her through indifference.

Prostrate all day, she turned her eyes to the friezes, the panels. . . . The arabesques seemed mobile to her. They fled as soon as she studied their movements. These traceries obsessed her. She felt herself seized in their

network and chafed at these imaginary bonds from which she could not succeed in freeing her spirit.

Ibrahim came to announce the sheik. Nour al-Ein made a gesture of irritation and went to meet him.

"The heat tires you," he said, on entering. "Why don't you sit on the north balcony? Come, you need some fresh air."

"No," said Nour al-Ein in a weary voice.

Al-Zaki studied her. For some time already he had noticed her sombre mood, her whims and the effort she had to make to receive him. He had spoken of it to Mussa ibn Yussouf, one of the best Jewish physicians in Cairo, who had predicted the coming of a child. The midwife, called at once, had declared the prediction unfounded, and had been of the opinion that Nour al-Ein should be exorcised.

Falling again into anxiety the sheik feared that his favourite companion had been touched by a languishing illness. He treated her tenderly, offered her a piece of velvet and bracelets, which she received smilingly as always, but he hesitated to question her, for marriage had established no intimacy between them. So this evening he wanted to come closer to her, to know her better.

"Fresh air is necessary for you, my child," he said. "Come. . . ."

"If you command it . . ." murmured Nour al-Ein.

He saw then that he did not know how to talk to her. "All I tell her," he thought, "will never be anything but a command, and her response will never be but a submission." They crossed the apartment and reached the balcony overlooking the garden. Vast and marble-tiled, it was surrounded by lattices. The sheik opened a window:

"Isn't it fine?"

He sat beside Nour al-Ein and admired her.

Waves of coolness passed through the tepid atmosphere. They came and went, chary and rapid. Nour al-Ein, her eyelids closed, breathed them until she thought she would faint.

"How fine it is," she said, repeating, without noticing it, the words of al-Zaki, with that exclusive enthusiasm that seemed to say: "What *you* feel doesn't matter; this is what *I* feel."

The twilight hour was near. In the trees of the garden the birds were returning to their branches. Each fig-tree received hundreds of them. Their joyful notes, their quarrels and their prayers mingled in a measureless song. One could hear at times the laughter of the servants in the courtyard. They spoke the barbarous dialect of the Sudan. Nour al-Ein was faint, and when, at times, she recovered a lucidity of the senses, she noticed suddenly, as after a long pause, the uninterrupted chorus of the birds.

## XVI

### THE RESURRECTION OF ISIS

G OHA did not suspect that Nour al-Ein was suffering on his account. He had accepted her as he would have accepted the fellaha who raised her *borgo* to smile at him. She had passed through his life as had so many others, without his taking the trouble to identify this mistress of a day. While she languished waiting for him, he calmly pursued the course of his existence. He felt a vague trouble, however—the sensation of a hollow at the bottom of his chest. At this discreet call of a memory he would rub his ear mechanically.

He still went to the home of the master of al-Azar, whose welcome was always affable. The coffee and the narghile were no less savoury. But something had changed. Al-Zaki told no more stories, he remained silent for long intervals, chaplet in hand. When he turned to Goha it was to say politely :

“ You gladden me. . . . ”

“ May God gladden you,” Goha would answer.

The slaves spoke low and bowed stiffly. They lowered their eyelids as soon as they were looked at, as though to hide secrets. The house seemed larger, emptier, and one would have said the steps of the stairway were difficult to climb. Entering his neighbour's house Goha felt timid. His affection for the sheik was slight and he rarely thought of putting a hand on his shoulder. When he looked at him fixedly, metamorphoses took place under his eyes. Little by little the sheik was transformed, his caftan became a light tunic, his features became feminine, his eyes took on a grey tone. . . . Goha vaguely recognised



this vision of a moment, but did not know how to distinguish it from the innumerable pictures al-Zaki had caused to spring up for him out of his books.

From these meetings Goha returned frustrate. A charm was lacking which he had felt unconsciously on his first visits.

On the other hand, he had come closer to Hawa. Between him and the negress almost nightly relations had been established. Whenever the inclination seized him he joined her on her mat. She feared to wake anyone by lighting the candle, and, besides, the darkness preserved her lover's illusion. He called her "My jasmine," and it was without malice. Returning to his room before dawn, he scarcely spoke a word to Hawa in the course of the day.

This union, which had lasted for a year, offered Goha regular and healthy pleasure. His conscience was not troubled, although the Koran, in the twenty-seventh verse of the fourth chapter, forbids a man's intimacy with his nurse. Ignorant of the Prophet's proscriptions he committed the sin with all the more innocence because Hawa lent herself to it without the slightest restraint.

One morning as he left the house he heard a shrill laugh. He paid no attention to it and went on. It was Amina who, posted at the window, was trying to attract his attention.

It was the time of Ramadan; the fast had already lasted a week. Nour al-Ein, obsessed by the thought of Goha, did not succeed in putting her soul into a perfect state of piety, and she saw with anguish the approach of the hour when the fate of beings should be fixed for the whole year.

"Ah! If I could know what will be written!" she would say to Amina. "I am in crime, I will be punished. . . . I see before me black days, black weeks. . . ."

Meanwhile Goha trudged toward Ghezireh. The evening

before his father had read him the description of paradise, where the fruit is always ripe, water always fresh and the body always in health. Goha knew where that paradise was to be found. He had discovered it from afar, in childhood. Because of a sort of superstitious fear he had confided his secret to no one. When he walked along the Nile his eyes turned south and fixed upon a heavy thicket.

"It is there," he would think, and avert his eyes.

Goha had gone out with a definite plan. He wanted to approach the spot so often glimpsed, the better to admire the great fruit-trees, the thousand streams of water, the singing birds and the women eternally young. Reaching a hamlet where he ordinarily ended his walk, he considered the mysterious thicket with his hand over his eyes. As always, his project terrified him. He moved away. The hamlet comprised about fifty cabins. It was built on a hillock, and, like most Egyptian villages, was circular in shape. Straight-breasted fellahas came out, water-jars on their heads, the border of their tunics trailing in the dust. Others beat linen on the edge of the stream. One flushed with shame as she saw Goha, and, having no veil over her face, raised her dress to cover her head.

"I saw you ! I saw you !" cried Goha, laughing, and he entered the village.

The cabins were small, about the height of a man. Joined bamboo stems formed the roofing, surmounted by giant chicken-coops and provisions of dead wood. At Goha's passage women's exclamations of surprise broke out. They took refuge in their houses, where one heard them noisily announcing the presence of a stranger. Goha stopped before the door of a mean hut.

"Haj Abd al-Akbar !" he cried, beating his hands.

"Who asks for him ?" said a woman's voice, coming from the interior.

"Is he there ?"

"No, he isn't here."

"Where is he?"

"In the skiff. . . . Wait a moment. . . . Who are you?"

"I am the son of Haj Mahmoud Riazy."

"May you live! Sidi, may you live! . . . Go . . . you'll find Abd al-Akbar on the Nile."

"Good-day, my aunt."

"Good-day, my son."

Goha descended the hillock. In the middle of the Nile a skiff floated motionless.

"Haj Abd al-Akbar!" Goha called, "Haj Abd al-Akbar! . . . Hey, there, hey! . . ."

The fisherman made sign that he had heard, and a quarter of an hour later he touched land.

The current was very strong. It took thirty-five minutes to cross the stream.

Abd al-Akbar was tall and thin. He spoke with a hoarse voice and with an aggrieved air, as though obsessed by a fixed idea. His forehead was high, furrowed with wrinkles; the rest of his face was small. A short grey beard seemed plastered on his hollow cheeks. He had kept silent during the whole crossing. On arriving, he pointed to a net in the bottom of the skiff.

"I have been fishing since dawn," he said. "There is nothing but bad fish."

"You fished yesterday?"

"I fish every day . . . Spring and Autumn, Summer and Winter. . . . The fish is small or big, but it is always fish. . . ."

Resuming his grave air he added:

"When you have finished your walk wake me up. I am going to sleep here as soon as I have prayed. . . . We cannot eat for six or seven hours."

Goha moved away. It was nearly a year since he

had come to Ghezireh. The Nile, grey with silt, rolled convulsively. In the distance the submerged plains of Ghizeh were covered with lakes. The bushes were mute, the palms inert. Reptiles crawled noiselessly.

Goha began to feel hungry and thirsty. A little dizzy, he wandered through the island, then lay down on the ground. He had stretched himself out under the acacia near the statue of Isis, that had been fixed since his last coming on a base of bricks.

Goha slept two hours. He woke with his limbs stiff and his mind foggy. His first inclination was to go and drink, but he remembered it was the month of Ramadan. He stretched himself at length. Suddenly he noticed Isis.

Displeased, he frowned. The goddess was not looking at him; she looked into the distance, over his head, her legs pressed together and her hands on her thighs. She dominated the place; she reigned over the desert island as she would have reigned over the impious crowds of the city. Goha felt with hate the goddess's superiority. She seemed to despise him, and that from the top of her base, without a gesture, without even turning on him her eyes of stone. He remembered having seen her before.

"It is the sheika," he murmured.

He moved away, a prey to vague apprehensions. Walking, he absent-mindedly placed his hand on the spiny leaf of a cactus. The pain released his anger against the statue.

"Idiot!" he exclaimed. "You're not a sheika! . . . You are nothing at all!"

As soon as he had spoken these words, he smiled, fearing to have compromised himself. He retraced his steps, and, approaching the goddess, patted her legs and her stomach amicably, and tickled her round the armpits, where Hawa always showed herself sensitive.

"It isn't true," he said slyly, "the idiot, that's me."

He hoped for an answer. An expression of resentment broke through his assumed joviality when he realised that Isis had been inattentive to his cajoleries. His nerves irritated, he aimed a slap at the stone. For an instant, intimidated by the boldness of his act, he awaited the movement of anger that would doubtless animate the arm of the sheika. But Isis submitted to the insult without stirring, and Goha, irritated by so much cowardice, defied her :

“ A sheika ? You ? ”

He added :

“ You can't even give me a kick ! ”

He crushed plants, tore flowers, with a drivel of abuse on his lips. He watched her with his eye, moved away, returned, invincibly attracted, and in fact undecided, not knowing what to do. From afar he threw stones at her, then again he spat in her face, shouting :

“ Be quiet ! If you say a word I'll kill you ! ”

Isis remained motionless and haughty. The outrages did not reach her. With horrible contortions Goha offered her a thousand grimaces, and with clenched fist, brutally, he gave her stiff, hard blows on the cheeks, on the head, on the breasts. He emitted convulsive short cries.

Then in the disorder of his senses, through his dizzy milling, he thought he saw the goddess rise, open her arms. . . . With a cry of terror he fell among the brambles.

Abd al-Akbar came running up.

“ What are you doing ? ” he asked. “ Why were you hitting that woman ? ”

“ It is she who hit me,” cried Goha, getting up. “ She struck me a blow on the head. . . . ”

He turned his eyes toward Isis. She was still motionless. Seized with terror, despite the calls of the old man, he fled as fast as he could.



When both had gone some distance from shore, Abd al-Akbar drew in his oars, and with a grave air questioned his companion :

"Are you sure of what you told me ? . . . The sheika struck you ?"

"And why should I lie to you ?" retorted Goha, still filled with emotion. "She got up, she opened her arms and she struck me. . . ."

"O Thou who protectest !" murmured the fisherman. "So she got up, she opened her arms and she struck you ?"

"It was I who struck her first. She stayed sitting a little while, then she got up, then she sat down again."

"O Thou who protectest !" repeated the fisherman.

"I hit her first. . . . She got angry. . . . She stood up and gave me a blow on the head. . . ."

"Let's see your head."

Goha uncovered his skull. A bump had formed at the temple. Abd al-Akbar pressed it with the palm of his hand. Goha having begun to cry, he wet the bump with a little saliva and took his oars. The current was strong. At times the fisherman interrupted his rowing in order to speak more freely, to pour out his bitterness.

"I knew, yes, I knew there was something, and that the fault was the woman's. . . . A sheika ! And who tells us there are no devils in her body ? Who tells us she has not the evil eye of an owl ? You won't believe me, Sidi, but for a year I catch nothing but misery, small fry that doesn't sell in the bazaars. . . . Yes, it's unbelievable !"

An expression of powerless grief deeply marked his thin and dirty face. His hoarse voice had become vehement.

"I knew, I knew it was a perverse sheika ! The Franks came, and they have unearthed misfortune. It was a



black day. . . . I have a few date palms on the island. . . . They have borne no fruit. . . . It's unbelievable! The Franks came; they crossed the stream. . . . They had the accursed heel. . . . They unearthed misfortune!"

When they had landed on the farther bank Goha left the fisherman. Women were grinding wheat between two little mill-stones. Goha stopped near a *sekia*. A blind-folded bull circled around its axis. The wheel it put in motion spilled the river water into the cornfields, Goha wiped his face and, having assured himself that the sinister adventure of which he had been the victim had not altered the ordinary course of his life, started for the city.

"Pooh!" he said, swelling his cheeks, "she is stuck to her stone!"

## XVII

### A FRIENDSHIP

ON the road he perceived an elongated blot. It was his shadow, that he noticed for the first time. He advanced ; the shadow preceded him. He knelt ; the shadow gathered itself. He brushed the earth with a quick movement, but he had to withdraw his hand briskly ; an arm beneath his own had stretched out over the ground. Although terrified, Goha did not lose countenance. He reflected on what he should do, for from the first minute he had understood that this form was that of a familiar spirit of the sheika's which she had sent in pursuit of him.

"Go back," he stammered, "go back to her."

Mimicking his gestures, the shadow gesticulated in hideous pantomime.

"She refuses," thought Goha. "The sheika wants to avenge herself because I hit her !" He undertook to convince the spirit, and said politely :

"Listen, O You whose name I do not know, you are in my way. . . . We are far from home. You will still have to go all the way back. . . . That double trip will tire you very much. . . ."

He stopped, thinking : "He will pass on ahead." He made as if to sit down, but it was only a pretence. Suddenly he leaped forward like one possessed. As long as he had a breath he went forward. Exhausted, he stopped, and near him, formless, tumultuous, implacable, stood the genie. Goha, shaken with a shudder, prostrated himself, with clasped hands :

"O You whose name I do not know, be kind. . . .

Return to the sheika and tell her I'll go and see her. . . . I'll bring water and fruit. . . ."

Having crossed the threshold of his house, he briskly closed the door. At sight of the divans, the mat and the lipless pitcher on the window ledge, he regained confidence. He could raise his hand, strike these familiar objects at will, smash them. He believed himself safe among these friendly things because, entirely submissive to his will, they gave him an illusion of limitless power.

When evening came, Hawa entered the room with a light. The monstrous genie stretched along the wall and Goha mumbled a prayer mechanically.

"What are you saying between your teeth, Sidi?"

"Hawa, the jinn! . . . The jinn! . . ."

At bedtime the shadow followed Goha into his room. He stretched himself on his mattress; it crawled along the partition above him. When the negress came to take the lamp, the shadow evolved, invaded the ceiling, descended upon the floor and clung to Hawa's dress. . . . Goha wanted to cry out, to warn the faithful servant, but the selfish joy of being rid of the genie repressed this generous impulse.

The next day, a melon under his arm and a jug in his hand, he went to Ghezireh. Having put down his offerings, he caressed Isis.

"Since we have become good friends," he said, "you ought to recall the genie."

When he withdrew, the shadow followed him. He understood that the sheika still held her grudge against him, and he resolved to placate her. For several days he paid her court. Abd al-Akbar questioned him, but Goha did not confide his secret to him. At times, at noon, the shadow disappeared, and Goha thought himself freed of it. Besides, little by little his anxiety was subsiding.

One morning, crossing the bazaar of the armourers, he noticed with astonishment that all the men had a dark blot under their feet.

“Genii ! They all have genii !” he had exclaimed.

He bore for some time with anxiety the burden of his discovery. Men who walked with ease, those who, squatting, polished a scimitar or a musket, seemed not to know the proximity of shapeless spirits whom they stamped on and jostled. Goha thought of the terrible revenges the genii must have of these outrages, and he endeavoured to leap over his.

Later he grew proud of being the only one to know a truth of such incalculable import. His spirit overhung abysses. He imagined the invisible and sure labour of thousands of discontented sheikas and also the distress of men, trailed without their knowing it. “It is fate,” he would tell himself, and he would add, “To each his fate.” He combined truncated notions, sentences gathered at random and personal remarks, in this way approaching the common life of people. His moral domain was modified as might be modified that of a learned scholar, inventor of a theological system. His intelligence was no less compared to that of others ; it was simply different. He put the unknown where others put the light, he did not bother with certain phenomena that others found mysterious, and he laughed in circumstances where others pitied. What men called his foolishness was only a manner of being different from theirs. He accepted their judgments without protest because he was modest and simple, and he lost his serene disposition only when men’s contempt was accompanied by violence.

Slowly, among familiar errors, his existence ran on. He had made friends with the statue of Isis and often visited her. He sat on a clump of earth facing her, composed himself in an attitude similar to hers and remained

motionless. Wearying, he rose, patted her legs, and asked her admiringly :

“How do you manage to remain seated so long ? ”

One morning he did not find the sheika. Startled, disconcerted, he considered the bare base, and a great sadness took possession of him.

“Where is the sheika ? ” he asked Abd al-Akbar when he had rejoined the latter in the skiff.

“They took her,” exclaimed the fisherman, “the day before yesterday, the day after Ramadan ! The devil take her ! I think she has poisoned the Nile for ten years. God protect us from her eye ! . . .”

Goha did not answer. He wanted to weep. Where would he walk after this ? He seemed always to have lived with the sheika. She having disappeared, he felt himself stripped of all purpose of life.

Nevertheless he thought he might yet find her. He devoted the following days to fruitless searches—visited the mosques, the cemeteries, penetrated into the court-yards of private houses, ferreted with his eyes through every half-open door he met on his way. He searched the city in every corner, entered the smoking-houses, loitered for hours in the girls’ quarter.

Having gone out to seek her again the fifth day, he passed a bazaar. He bought oranges and went to sleep on a high headland in the desert. The next day he did the same. It was thus that, having given a different aim to his activities, he regained in forgetfulness his happy care-free state.

**PART THREE: GOHA AND NOUR  
AL-EIN**





## XVIII

### HAWA'S SORROW

**T**HE three wives of Haj Mahmoud were with child. The household that Allah distinguished by this signal favour lived in a continual flutter. Seeresses had prophesied a boy to each of the women, and already the slaves and frequenters of the house looked on Goha with an air of dismay, knowing what a prejudice the birth of a brother would bring against him.

Mahmoud was considerate of his wives. He spoke to them more often and even tolerated modestly expressed opinions. He divided himself among them with a great regard for equity. He invited them in turn to sit on his divan and receive his caresses. The gift he made to one he made to the other two, and not once could they have complained of the slightest partiality.

This order of things ensured peace in the harem. Besides, not knowing which would be the elect and which humiliated, Zeinab, Hellal and Nassim maintained among themselves on all occasions a very formal politeness. From morning to night they lavished advice on each other; never did they fail to warn each other, "Pinch your belly, sister," at the sight of a deformed man or a monstrous beast.

Nevertheless, each caught herself studying out of the corner of an eye the walk, the figure, the appetite of her companions. Would it be a son? a daughter? The answer of the seeresses left a great deal to doubt, so many had been the mothers deceived by favourable predictions.

As for Hawa, she was very much occupied. For several months her mistresses had abstained from all movement.

At every moment she had to pass them the water-pitcher, toast corn-meal, prepare the narghile, offer them coffee, pistachios, lupine, preserves. Hawa did not complain. She worked joyously, thinking that Mahmoud would at last be satisfied. Ten times a day she surprised her ladies with a savoury cream of hazel-nuts and coriander, that was to soften the features of the children to be born.

It was learned meanwhile that the great Cadi was to wed the daughter of the great Sheik of al-Azar. The citizens of Cairo approved of this union, and the house of Riazy was in commotion. Five women of the neighbourhood were called in haste to prepare garments for Zeinab, Hellal, Nassim and their daughters. In the antechamber, around the three motionless wives, slaves, poor neighbours and little girls cut, sewed, yelled among unrolled strips of chatoyant cloth. Hawa's work had increased. There were many people to serve. But the thought that her mistresses would soon display with pride their visible maternity in an innumerable and chosen company sustained her courage.

"They will be the queens of the feast!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "They are the three wives of the same man! What an honour for Sidi Mahmoud! What an honour for the family!"

Suddenly Hawa's gaiety fell. She was less ardent at her work, she prepared fewer infusions of herbs, and her coffee no longer tasted so good. She was surprised at the windows, doing nothing, and when questioned she obstinately revealed nothing. In reality this state of prostration was not continuous. She had fits of activity, revivals of enthusiasm, in which she showed herself attentive, diligent, humorous. Her disposition was none the less altered; she had a trouble she would confide to no one. To Zeinab's questions she invariably replied that she was happy.

Came at last the day of the wedding. Fearing that the name of Riazzy would again be the butt of jokes, Mahmoud had decided that his son should remain at home and that Hawa should keep him company. At the last minute Goha had obtained permission to walk through the city, on his formal promise not to wander in the direction of the festivities.

Hawa had begged one of her negress friends to spend the afternoon with her. They spent it in talking and in braiding each other's hair. That was one of the most complicated elements of their toilet. Their hair was short and frizzy, the fingers could hold little of it, and the number of braids necessary for a head to be decent was thirty at least.

Night overtook them at their labour. The visitor hastened home and Hawa remained alone. She shot the bolts, entered the kitchen and filled a basin with water. She undressed, washed her feet, her arms, her face, and, with the same water, rinsed her mouth. Crouching before the basin she breathed noisily, for this position made her movements painful. Her long breasts, following the inclination of the bust, swung or spread out on the floor. When she had finished her ablutions she rose. Her bronze body, seen from the front, was narrow, the hips compressed, the legs slender; seen in profile, it presented pronounced curves, all of which, those of the belly, of the back, of the thighs, converged at the extremities of enormous and pointed buttocks.

"Hawa ! Hawa !" called a nasal voice,

"Oh, mother !" exclaimed the slave, startled by this call.

She added :

"Hey ! Bagba, you scared me ! Bagba, you are a naughty boy !"

"Hawa ! Hawa ! Damn your father !"

“Hey ! Look here, Bagba, aren’t you ashamed ? Why do you want my father damned ? . . . My father ? . . . Do I know who my father is ? ”

As she spoke her flabby flat-nosed face with its little yellow eyes remained expressionless. She tried to sound her memory, to recover a few reminiscences of the past. She had been carried away by some merchants while still a little girl. She vaguely remembered the village where one walked naked, where one slept in huts. The men hunted large animals that were roasted over great fires ; in the evening they bathed in rivers infested with crocodiles. Then she had followed a caravan in the sands, sands without end . . . how long ? Months, years, years. . . .

“My father . . .” she murmured, sighing. “Ah ! Leave him where he is, Bagba. . . .”

On its perch near the window a parrot stood on one leg, watching her attentively with its round eyes. Motionless, head buried in its feathers, it had a sly and lazy air.

At times it half opened its beak and gave a strident whistle. Suddenly it straightened, struck its seed-cup violently with its beak, spilling the contents on the tiles, slid on its bar, and swung, hanging by its feet and crying vehemently :

“Hawa. . . . Damn your father ! . . . Damn your father ! . . . Tozz ! . . . Tozz ! . . .”

The slave shrugged her shoulders.

“My father . . . my father. . . . Ah, Bagba, do I know who my father is ? ”

She went to get two carefully wrapped packages from a corner and opened them. One contained bits of cloth of all sorts, few larger than the hand ; the other a rolled-up gallabiah of striking colours. She took it in her hands, unrolled it, considered it a long time with an affectionate air. For some minutes she did not answer Bagba’s quips.

Hawa was not young ; she had never been pretty, but nevertheless she was a coquette. She was fastidious in all the care she gave her person, and she had created an ideal image of herself, a sort of double that realised all her wishes. It was the joy of her siestas and of her nights to dream of this other self that was distinguishable only by more evident and more numerous allurements. She surrounded it with all that to her was inaccessible—the richest dresses, the most precious jewellery. However, she took care never to evoke these fantasies anywhere but on her mat. If it happened that, admiring the finery of her ladies, she found herself wishing she had similar attire, quickly she chased the wicked thought with a wave of the hand and reprimanded herself with a half-serious, half-amused air : “ Come, Hawa, come, I’ll be angry ! ” Unable to possess sumptuous pieces of damask and brocade, she was content to pick up the cuttings ; not being able to fill her coffers with gold cords, embroideries, veils, she collected bits of them. But, on this modest scale, it was a mania.

It was thirty years since Hawa had been acquired by Mahmoud’s father. For thirty years not the smallest rag had trailed on the floor, in a basket or on a divan in the house of the Riazys. Cotton, wool, linen, silk, Hawa pilfered all. It was known in the family ; the rags were for Hawa. She had accumulated them in heaps with an avaricious joy.

In her hours of leisure she fitted her patches. Minutely she joined the cuttings, combined colours, striving for local contrasts and general harmony. She proudly displayed a coverlet with white ground variegated in red, violet, yellow, indigo ; and other lesser works. But her zeal and her intelligence had been devoted for two years to the assembling of the very gallabiah she had just unfolded.



"Open the door! Open the door!" cried the parrot, mimicking the voice of Zeinab.

"The door?" said Hawa. "There is no one at the door. . . . You are a liar, Bagba!"

"Open the door! . . . Give me some food! . . . Tozz-tozz-tozz! . . ."

Hawa sighed.

"For whom do you want me to open the door? When Goha goes out he doesn't come back. He is a child," she added, shaking her head. "I have fallen into the hands of a child."

She sketched a gesture of impotence and her face took on an expression of consternation. Her yellow eyes roved from the packages to the corners of the room. She hesitated, undecided whether to abandon herself to the unhappy thoughts appropriate to her predicament, or to give herself to her coquette's instincts. She took a needle and sighed:

"Could I have known it?"

Soon absorbed in her work, she forgot the cause of her suffering. The nearly finished gallabiah realised in full her ideal. Humming a negro song, Hawa built a yellow fringe around the right sleeve to balance the silver fringe already attached to the left sleeve. She stopped to consider the bodice of light blue satin set off at the breasts with two small medallions of emerald velvet, embroidered with gold threads. They were the principal ornaments of the dress. From the neck, bordered with a silk cord taken from an old awning, started two bands of crimson brocade that stopped at the knees. Although she considered the top of her tunic too plain, Hawa decided not to alter it. Besides, from the belt down the richness of the colour scheme augmented. Down to the knees the dress simulated a brilliant checker-board. Bits of stuff were placed with some attempt at symmetry; but if

green was well balanced by green, and pink by pink, a purple rectangle, the only one of that colour, corresponded with a yellow circle.

“Tozz ! Tozz !”

“Bagba, look at my gallabiah ! . . . It's a queen's dress, Bagba ! . . . I am going to put it on, and when Goha comes I'm going to talk to him. . . . I'll talk to him the way he should be talked to. . . .”

She rose and sang, swinging her bare hips :

“ *Here is my gallabiah,  
My pretty gallabiah. . . .  
Hey ! Hey ! Hawa,  
Here is your gallabiah !* ”

Having expressed her pleasure, she was seized with a sort of terror, that of creatures astonished at having been chosen by misfortune, and unable to recognise themselves in the event that strikes them. She looked around, shook her head and went out, mumbling : “ Could I have known it ? ”

She entered Zeinab's room, approached the Venetian mirror hanging on the wall, and donned the dress. She smiled involuntarily at her image. In this gallabiah, falling stiffly around her, she found herself rejuvenated, beautified, irresistible. The thought passed through her mind that others, less seductive, were wives of great lords. In the kitchen Bagba was making a great uproar.

“ This time it is he,” said Hawa, listening.

She looked a last time at her reflection and, in a thin, timid and drawling voice :

“ Who has come ? ” she said.

“ Open, it is I.”

“ All right, Sidi ; I'll open.”

She drew the bolts and let Goha in, hiding behind the door, her eyes lowered in token of humility. He installed

himself on the divan ; Hawa squatted on the floor, facing him. She watched him, eager to catch his expression at sight of her dress. He stared at her a long time and said nothing. A dull resentment rose in the heart of the negress at the outrage of this indifference. Then what she had to say, the dramatic occasion, possessed her mind, and, resolving to overwhelm her lover with a brutal revelation of misfortune, she assumed a grave, detached, superior air :

“ If you don’t want to congratulate me on my gallabiah, it doesn’t matter to me. I swear it doesn’t matter to me. . . .”

She stopped to allow Goha to repair his omission. He said nothing, not understanding the grievance held against him.

“ It doesn’t matter to me,” pursued Hawa. “ Donkeys never understand what ginger is . . .” and, completely abandoning her reserve, she added, her eyes fixed obliquely on the tiles :

“ Listen, Goha, I want to say a word to you. . . .”

He watched her calmly, unmoved by the net of solemnity she was striving to throw about him. She added in a falsetto voice :

“ Only before that word I want to say another word.”

Concentrating all her efforts on what she had to say, she sought to proceed methodically :

“ In the first place, you have drunk my milk. . . . The child Mahmoud gave me died, and you, you drank my milk. But never mind that . . . it isn’t what I had to tell you. Here is what I had to tell you : and in the first place, you forced me to lie with you.”

“ I don’t remember,” said Goha.

This inconsistency, upsetting all her plans, brought a burst of anger from Hawa.

"What!" she exclaimed, "you didn't come to my mat! you didn't say to me, 'Hush! I am my father!' Me, I believed you. . . . I am a woman."

Goha honestly did not remember. Nevertheless he acquiesced kindly.

"All right, Hawa, all right. . . . As you will, as you will, Hawa."

A silence followed. The negress, on her haunches, became threatening. Her eyes were bloodshot and her open hand, at the end of an arm rising vertically from her knee, indicated that she had not finished her speech. At last, still methodically, she spoke:

"In the first place . . ."

She stopped and murmured rapidly:

"Be careful, Goha! Don't cross me. The devils have me, and when the devils possess me I don't know what I might do. . . . Ah! Yes! . . . Be careful!"

She resumed the interrupted sentence:

"In the first place, you deceive me. . . . You do outside what you do with me. . . . You were seen with a fellaha. . . . Say if it isn't true. . . . No, no, I won't have it. . . . You were seen in a garden. . . . I won't have it. . . . You understand, Goha, all that doesn't matter to me. . . . What can it matter to me? All that doesn't matter to me. . . . And in the first place, I am pregnant! . . ."

This revelation she had slowly led up to—she was astounded at having made it so simply. She remained disconcerted for a minute, then her fever fell; she assumed a calm attitude, modest, humble, drooping her eyelids like a virgin with whom fate plays without her wishing to influence it.

"There, I have told you, master. . . ."

Goha felt that she expected an answer, some appreciation on his part, without realising the tragic character

of the revelation just made to him. Not knowing how to answer, he tried to express a polite interest in the negress :

“ God willing, you are well ? ”

Hawa raised her head. In her flabby face the eyes alone held any expression. They announced a hateful spite that contrasted with the apparent sweetness she was able to impose on her voice as she sighed :

“ Who knows what Mahmoud will say ? ”

“ Let him say,” Goha murmured absent-mindedly, with an evasive gesture.

“ I should let him say ? ”

“ Let him say,” Goha repeated with less assurance, furtively looking at the slave.

“ I should let him say ? Are you crazy ? Answer me ! ”

Taken at his word, Goha was troubled ; he had given a sentence, any sentence, without taking account of its meaning, to free himself of Hawa and rest after his long walk. Now the negress demanded explanations that seemed to him useless, that he felt himself incapable of giving, and this mischance made him drop his head in pain.

“ Answer me ! . . . I have warned you, my devils are beginning to jump.”

“ Do as you like, Hawa,” he stammered, with a look of appeal.

She knew the change in her figure would have terrible consequences, being Goha's doing. But she was unable to conceive an event in the future, to envisage in all its fullness this still-distant calamity. She considered it stupidly. Since she had become conscious of her predicament, she had endeavoured in vain to realise it. Like all the weak-minded and all those of her race, she lacked forethought. And so her grief, however vehement, was merely artificial, and Goha's impassiveness thwarted her



endeavour to suffer. To confide her secret to him and decide on a plan of action she had waited to be alone with him, and now, at the very first exchange of words, even the sense of her misfortune escaped her.

"Hawa! . . . tozz! . . . Damn your father!" cried the piercing voice of the parrot.

To create a diversion Goha burst out laughing.

"You hear, Hawa, you hear? . . ."

Then she felt bewildered and terrified before this obstinate incomprehension, and to rally her energies around her drama, to envelop herself in her drama and impose a vision of it on Goha, she resorted to violent pantomime and words consecrated to despair. She rose in the centre of the room, struck her head, her face, her breast, chanting a plaintive litany:

"Come to my rescue," she exclaimed, "all of you, the good ones, the generous, the beautiful, men with great waists and women with white skin! I am lost! The storm is on my head! . . . And Goha is an ass, and I am in the hands of an ass!"

With rhythmic steps she rounded the room, clinging to the walls and knocking her forehead. She pronounced the words mechanically, a little absent-mindedly, seeking to recognise the cause of her lamentations, the consequences of her fault, from which she would have to suffer.

"Oh, mother," she continued, "I fed a bull for six years. . . . Then I lay with that bull. . . . And look! . . . Oh, mother, I gave him my milk and he has given me a child!"

As she danced her movements became more spontaneous, her face wilder and more intense. Slowly she swung her hips. Her anger grew little by little. Suddenly she howled like a wild beast. She had glimpsed the fate awaiting her.

"Woe is me! . . . Woe is me! . . . My master will



crush me with his feet, my real master, he who has white hair and a just heart. Oh, woe! He will drive me out of his house! . . . Oh, woe! I will be like the she-dogs . . . I will be brought to bed in the street, and I will die in the street. . . . Oh, woe!" She stopped before Goha, then she fell on him and struck him, abused him :

"You are not a man! . . . Come, get up! . . . You have committed a great sin! Tell me what to do! Come, tell me what to do! . . ."

Goha felt unutterably ill at ease before this distress that he did not share, that he could not explain. Doubtless there was a hidden meaning in the slave's words. Hitherto, in the painful hours of his life, he had found refuge in Hawa; she understood men better than he did, she had always known how to interpret their thoughts to him. Goha wanted to appease her and, while she abused him, he asked :

"Hawa, what is the matter? Do you want something?"

She uncovered her head and pulled her hair. Continuing her dance, she sang with cruel irony :

"Goha, you are a man among men; you are my support, you are my right arm and my left arm! How could I fear misery when you uphold me?"

The storm raged between these two and shook them like bits of straw. They were a mournful sight, this man who fought in vain against the obscurity of his mind; this woman who abandoned herself to events, grotesque in her despairing naïveté. What Goha saw was Hawa's grief; what Hawa saw was the fate that was to destroy her. She was thus above him in her perception of an inevitable catastrophe. And there, narrow, miserable, was the whole domain of their intelligence, their whole field of reasoned action.

"Tell me what I am to do! . . . You are my support.

. . . What are you doing here ? Go, go to work ! Go and work for your child ! . . . To-morrow you will take the donkey and a bag of beans and you will sell beans. . . . Go to work ! . . .”

Goha felt his being contract, diminish, re-enter into its habitual resignation.

“ As you like,” he said. “ I’ll take the donkey and the bag of beans. . . . Don’t be angry, Hawa. I’ll go to work. . . .”

The crisis was over. Wearied by her contortions, Hawa sat beside Goha. Her eyes had dulled. In her soft face no feeling wandered ; her black brow and her neck shone with perspiration. She had settled nothing, contrived nothing to mitigate misfortune. Her lover had not understood the gravity of the moment. Seeing her subside, he had thought the trial over. Hawa remained silent, as though she had found reassurance. In reality she had grieved for the sake of a principle ; having offered the spectacle of her distress, she was satisfied. Whatever the results of the scene, she had done her duty toward herself, and her mind was incapable of maintaining itself longer in the abstract idea of the future. She put her arm on Goha’s shoulder and spoke in a softened voice :

“ I told Sidi Mahmoud to give you a trade. He said : ‘ Hawa, he doesn’t know how to do anything.’ I said, ‘ Let him sell beans.’ So he bought as many sacks as he has fingers on his hands and, God willing, to-morrow you will take the donkey and you will sell beans.”

“ All right, Hawa.”

“ Little by little you will become a man.”

“ Yes, Hawa.”

A ray of moonlight passed through the grilled window. A dark spot stretched on the floor. Goha watched it curiously and became absorbed in vague memories.

Hawa rose and entered the kitchen to pack up her

scattered rags. She returned and stood coquettishly before Goha.

"How wicked you are, Sidi," she murmured. "You haven't seen my gallabiah?"

"I saw your gallabiah, Hawa. It is very pretty."

"Look, Sidi, look! . . . You haven't told me to 'wear it and use it with joy.' . . ."

"Wear it and use it with joy, Hawa."

Goha went to the garden door and opened it.

Hawa, who was preparing her mat for sleep and was about to undress, asked:

"Where are you going, Goha?"

"I am going out. . . ."

Slightly annoyed, she concealed her feeling. Zeinab had often repeated that to retain a man's love a woman must make herself submissive and discreet.

"All right, Sidi, go out. . . . Don't be late, Sidi. . . ."

"May your night be happy, Hawa."

"Take the key, Sidi. When you return don't wake me up—and shoot the bolts. . . ."

## XIX

### THE FIRST NIGHT

GOHA walked rapidly toward the desert. The sky was luminous; the moon in sharp outline spread over the city and the sand-dunes a limpid clarity without vibration, without play of atoms. At times a thin breeze, sudden and direct, glided in the atmosphere as through a fissure.

Goha took a lane strewn with bits of glass and porcelain. At his approach night-birds flew away, lazily describing a curve in space. At times he followed a ruined wall, then on both sides of the road it was plains of sand again, where here and there rose the isolated dome of a tomb.

A hill obstructed the horizon. Goha climbed its slope. He paused at the summit. To his right stretched a white city, silent and deserted—the necropolis; to his left, a white city equally silent and deserted—Cairo. Suddenly, apart, a mosque with its uplifted finger—Kait Bey.

Goha entered the necropolis. He followed the white houses and, adjoining these houses, the tiny marble-tiled courts where the tombs were ranged, some bare, others capped with a turban.

“They are praying,” Goha reflected gravely.

Cairo slept; the necropolis slept. The only watchers were these forms, petrified in prayer—the tombs.

Goha had regained the road to the desert. The mosque of Sultan Barkuk seemed to him a many-headed monster. He drew away from it.

But a shadow had risen before him. It was Omar, the keeper of the tombs.

“Where are you going at this hour?”

"By the grace of God . . ."

"God be praised. . . . What are you doing here ? "

The question was so unexpected that, having recorded it unconsciously, Goha did not hear it until long after. What was he doing there ? He looked at Omar with a disconcerted air.

Goha had walked at random in the need to lose himself in the night. He had acted all unconscious of the motive of his action, just as we live without knowing the meaning of life, and his awakening was as painful as ours when we find ourselves responsible for what we had believed inevitable.

Goha's silence and his strange attitude awoke Omar's suspicions.

"Well ? " he said, gripping his stick.

Goha might have answered, "I am taking a walk," and thus saved himself. But he was not used to the formulas, always the same, that suffice for men in their daily encounters. He sought in vain to define the aspirations he had obeyed and, giving it up, stammered :

"How should I know ? "

Suddenly he thought of questioning Omar. Perhaps between them they would find the answer to a question he alone was unable to elucidate. But the keeper had seized him vigorously by the caftan.

"First of all, who are you ? "

"Goha . . ."

Omar's grip relaxed.

"Goha ! . . ." he said kindly. "You should have said so, my poor child. . . . Come, go home. . . . Everybody is in bed. . . ."

"Everybody is in bed," Goha repeated, impressed by the idea, and sadly he retraced his steps.

In the vestibule Hawa was snoring. He entered his room and stretched himself on a mattress. The close

atmosphere of the room oppressed his chest. He turned on one side, then on the other, closed his eyes, opened them. Annoyed at having gone to bed without being able to sleep, he felt a dull resentment — against whom? He did not really know. Softly he murmured, “Bull! Bull!” and this invective, in which was more of melancholy than anger, he addressed to the keeper of the tombs, to his own person, to the human race. Meanwhile he rose. By the stairway behind the kitchen, and then by the aid of a ladder, he gained the terrace, there to satisfy, far from all eyes, his immense desire for liberty.

About the same time Nour al-Ein, accompanied by Amina, Yasmine and Mirmah, was returning from the great Cadi’s. The festivities had worn her out. She had gone in feverish haste, hoping to see Goha, whose return she had vainly awaited for two months. Having answered in a dry manner the greetings of the guests, she had seated herself at a window overlooking the gardens of the palace. Though dazzled by the garlands of multicoloured lanterns hanging from the vast awnings, and unable to distinguish anything at first in the crowd stirring under her eyes, she understood that her lover was not there, that he would not come, and she had no other thought but to return home. The feast was to last until morning. After the display of the traditional napkin she pretended a violent headache and with her slaves entered her palanquin. Ibrahim the eunuch followed on foot.

Nour al-Ein shut herself in her room and unfastened her dress. Stretched on her bed she moved constantly, seeking a cool spot. The intermittent breeze from the desert, penetrating through the open window, swept her body and ruffled the flame of the night-light. She wanted to weep and could not. She tried to think and gave that up at once. To this debility of thought and emotions corresponded a growing irritability of her nerves. Her



small and supple body seemed to her an enormous mass, avid of brutal sensations. She took a pitcher that stood near the bed, placed the damp mouth on her lower lip and drank lengthily, with little sips. Eyes half closed, she followed inwardly the trickling of the water. A drop fell on her neck. She experienced a subtle voluptuousness, and laughed so suddenly that she drenched her breast and wet the sheets.

"Amina! Amina! Help!" she exclaimed in noisy gaiety.

The slave came running. She was red with emotion.

"Get up, Nour al-Ein! Get up! . . . Goha! . . . Get up!"

Nour al-Ein had leaped to the rug. She took Amina by the shoulders, shook her. The slave laughingly tried to seize the little hands of her mistress.

"Speak!" exclaimed Nour al-Ein.

"But, darling," retorted the young slave, struggling to free herself, "you don't let me. . . ."

"Then he is up there? Goha is on the terrace? He told you to call me?"

Hastily she undid her braids and donned her tunic.

"My shawl . . ." she continued. "There—at your left. . . . He will beseech me and you'll see how hard I'll be. . . . Ah! I can be wicked when I want to be. . . . Let's go up; you come with me!"

They took a little stairway that started from the harem and gained the terrace.

"You see him?" said Amina, stretching out her arm.

"Go back!" commanded Nour al-Ein in a hard voice, and the young slave hastened to obey, having noticed an ugly line on her mistress's brow.

The two terraces almost touched. The house of Mahmoud Riazy, corbelled like most of the buildings in Cairo, projected at its upper story toward Sheik al-Zaki's house.

Nour al-Ein saw at once that Goha could join her easily.

Goha leaned against a pile of worn-out pots and wash-tubs. The pure sky arched upward, pricked with stars that, in the simple one's belief, were holes opening on an incandescent world, through which the multiple eye of Allah spied on men. The domes, the terraces, the minarets of Cairo rose in clear outline in their uniform whiteness. In the limpid clarity of the night it was a succession of curves, angles and arrows of a geometrical exactitude. Motionless, because everything around him was motionless, Goha abandoned himself to a sweet beatitude. He thought of many things, without realising it, as though it were someone else thinking within him.

Nothing escaped him, neither the flight of a bird nor the breezes, and nothing troubled him. He was on terms of intimacy with the old wall-end he perceived at the end of the garden as well as with the trees and the stars. The sky, that great solid vault placed over the city like the dome over a mosque, threatened, it is true, to crumble now and then. Goha knew also that from the desert stretching to his right there often came *khamsins* made of the breath of ten thousand demons, overturning houses, uprooting trees, picking up men. . . . But he was sure nothing like that would happen to-night. And even if the sky did crumble over his head, crush him, kill him ? . . . He would be dead. . . . Goha smiled long and blissfully at this idea. . . . What would be the difference when he was dead ? In the silence of the night he was in such harmony with nature that even the thought of its unleashed elements pleased him, as though he were a part of their forces, as though their march were in accord with his will.

One might at this moment say to Goha : " You are Botros, the Copt, son of Mikail," and he would not protest, would not feel himself different for all that.

Behind the balustrade a form had risen. He saw it and closed his eyes. When he reopened them his glance rested on it and the image became distinct. The presence of a woman seemed to him as natural as the presence of the date palm, whose dishevelled head he saw in the distance.

While approaching the balustrade Nour al-Ein had planned to its slightest detail the scene that was to follow: she had carefully prepared her replies, she had foreseen those of Goha. The inexplicable immobility of her lover disconcerted her. "He hasn't seen me," she thought, painful as it was to admit, and she resolved to keep her patience. Nevertheless Goha did not seem in any way to conform to the rôle she had assigned him. His big eyes calmly turned to her, then to the stars, to the right, to the left, returning at last to the young woman. Under his melancholy gaze Nour al-Ein felt herself weaken; but her weakness was only momentary, for the eyes of Goha now stared at a vague point in the desert. . . . Nour al-Ein had just convinced herself that he was playing with her. "He is laughing at me!" she stammered in a rage. Goha's insolence choked her.

"It is for you to beseech me—yes, for you!" she exclaimed. And after a short pause she added:

"Come . . . beseech me; perhaps I'll forgive you. . . . Beseech me!"

These words produced no effect on Goha. It was necessary, however, that everything should happen just as she had imagined it. One might have said her happiness, her very life were the stake of this wager.

"Come . . . come and beseech me!" she resumed in a trembling voice. "I beg you, come and beseech me!"

Tears rose to her eyes, her lips quivered.

While Goha's personality had resolved itself into the

universe, Nour al-Ein's consciousness was fiercely concentrated on the need of a word of entreaty. And this word she cried for became of gigantic importance. It lost for her its exact significance, it lost all significance even. . . . It was no more than a sound, and that sound, so necessary to her life, she struggled with her whole desperate will to draw from the terrible and powerful being she saw this minute in Goha.

The latter, half raising himself, asked :

" You are calling me ? "

His voice was odd. He seemed to have been torn from sleep in the midst of dreams. She did not answer. In the short silence that followed, a veil was dissipated, and they were astonished to find themselves so near each other, so much alike.

" You are calling me ? " he asked a second time.

Nour al-Ein answered briefly :

" Come ! "

Anxiously he rose and stepped over the two balustrades.

With one hand she seized his wrist, with the other she savagely pinched his arm. With bent body and raised head she glared at her lover without a word. A gleam of hate shone in her eyes and she thought of precipitating Goha over the parapet into the street. Suddenly she flung herself against him and belaboured his breast with her hard forehead. Goha felt himself going backward into a void. He became terrified by the danger that threatened him and protested.

" Hey there ! Hey there ! Why ? Hey there ! "

Then she straightened up. She had exhausted her anger. Now she laughed madly and abandoned herself altogether to the joy of having again found her lover, who, amazed, admired her with a fatuous contentment. Besides, the minutes were precious, for the dawn was not far away and Sheik al-Zaki was due back from the feast.

She hung on Goha's neck and dragged him to the ground with her.

While she recounted her grief, her hopes, her disappointments, he looked at her gently and caressed her cheeks. He found her pretty. Her words, although he was not attending to them, pleased him. Instead of answering, he rearranged a recalcitrant lock on her brown temple, murmuring, "Yes . . . yes. . . ."

"You had forgotten me? . . . You loved another?"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." repeated Goha.

"Cad! Cad! I knew it!" she exclaimed.

Her face, which had softened to candour, became ugly. Goha stopped talking. He was allured by this imperious and tender woman, whose every movement was unexpected. He covered her arms with kisses, hugged her waist as though he wanted to keep her from escaping. He uttered cries of admiration:

"Allah! Allah! Allah!"

"Then, in the library. . . . You have forgotten? . . ."

"I don't know, I don't know," said Goha, more and more intoxicated.

She repulsed him nervously, but he held her to him. His roving eyes rested on the white city, on the stars and on the bluish desert. . . . How small and insignificant and useless all that appeared. . . . The whole universe entered into this woman; she was everything. With a convulsive shudder he kneaded her flesh in his fingers.

"You remember? . . ." stammered Nour al-Ein.

In this murmur she revealed all her weakness.

Again a word, a single word, no matter how untrue, was necessary. In a muffled voice Goha answers. In his eagerness to please he acquiesces mechanically in what she wants:

"I remember. . . . Yes. . . ."



## XX

### NOUR AL-EIN'S AWAKENING

**A**T dawn, Amina, finding Nour al-Ein asleep on the terrace, knelt beside her.

"Wake up, darling!" she said in an anxious voice. "Wake up; the sheik will be coming back!"

She took the little hand of her mistress and laid kisses on the painted fingers.

"Amina," said Nour al-Ein, "naughty girl; I was sleeping so well!"

She had opened her eyes, but she was too weary to make any movement.

"Is he gone?" she asked.

"He is gone, yes. . . . But your clothes! . . . Is your heart satisfied?"

"Amina, you can't know. . . ."

"You will tell me everything, but we must go down. . . . Come!"

Nour al-Ein, aided by the slave, rose and crossed the terrace.

"If you could only see your eyes!" said Amina tenderly. "They are big! . . . Never have your eyes been so big! . . ."

Nour al-Ein gave a yawn that disclosed her pink palate.

"Take me away. . . . I'm dying of sleepiness."

In her bed, however, she did not succeed in regaining sleep. She changed position at every moment. Tossing everywhere, she became tangled in the covers. She threw them off suddenly, sat up and covered her buzzing temples with her hands. For a long time she remained thus, unable to think, listening to the beating of her heart.



A persistent bitter taste made her grimace. She stretched and, bringing her hands before her in the form of a cross, she studied, without disgust, her dirty fingers.

"What is the matter with me?" she said vacantly.

Her weakness had a cause that escaped her. She was unhappy . . . but why?

"Allah!" she exclaimed.

She had suddenly understood.

"Amina! Amina!"

The slave appeared. Nour al-Ein took her by the arm so roughly that her nails sank in the flesh.

"You are tearing me!"

"I'd like to tear your soul!" cried Nour al-Ein, without relaxing her fingers. "I hate you! . . . You caused the misfortune of my life. I hate you! . . ."

"But how?" stammered Amina, flushing and ready to weep.

"How? Because you are jealous! . . . You let me go up dressed like a beggar. . . . Look! Look at my gallabiah! . . . It is dirty, torn. . . . I, Nour al-Ein, the wife of Sheik al-Zaki!"

Her voice was hoarse and trembling with anger.

"But it was up there that you tore it," stammered Amina.

"What could he think of me?" continued Nour al-Ein without listening. "How he must despise me! He will never return, never! . . . For whom would he come back? For a beggar? And when I think . . ."

She ran to her chests, drew out shawls, turbans, tunics of veiling, tunics of silk, opalescent, decorated with threads of gold or silver, and threw them pell-mell on the divans, the rugs. At each piece of finery it was the same pantomime of consternation and the same plaint:

"You see! You see! I could have worn this . . . I could have worn that. . . ."

Standing before a Venetian mirror Nour al-Ein spent the morning trying on, one after another, all her dresses. She thought neither of saying her prayers nor of washing. The black paste that accentuated her eyebrows had come off in scales and streaked her moist face. Her tousled hair stood up in tufts on her head. On her fever-dry lips that she had bitten blood had clotted.

Frenziedly, furiously, Nour al-Ein wanted to be beautiful. She did not think of Goha, she did not think of alluring. . . . To beautify the image reflected in the mirror—to that end her whole will was bent.

Old Mirmah circled around her and Amina, whom her mistress was bullying. With her bony hand she covered her chin and made a visible effort not to speak. Nour al-Ein watched her in the mirror. Her gesture, her silence, and particularly her way of turning around them exasperated her, but the respect she had for her mother's nurse halted the unkind words on her lips.

"Don't I please you?" she asked in a weak voice.

Mirmah, hurt, did not hasten to answer. She slowly raised her shaking head, then said:

"Allah is the judge of my feelings."

"Then tell me what is the matter."

The old woman placed on Nour al-Ein's arm the tips of her hard fingers.

"The matter . . . the matter is that it isn't done," she said, shaking her head. "It isn't done. . . . There are rules in life. . . . You are young, and I too have been young. . . . But there are things one does not do outside, on the terrace, out in the open, when one is a lady, when one has rank. . . . Ask whom you will, a reasonable, mature person, if that is the custom."

Nour al-Ein was dismayed. The reproach of having outraged the traditions of her caste gave her the sense of a fall from grace. She tried to justify herself.

“Consider, auntie. . . . When I go out Ibrahim is always there spying on me. . . . Here, is it possible?”

“That’s true,” answered Mirmah, convinced. “You can’t do otherwise, my poor pigeon. . . . But there are usages, there are usages.”

## XXI

### THE DAWN OF AN EMOTION

INSTEAD of running to the fountain, Goha remained in bed, his legs stretched out, his arms hanging. The sunlight that flooded the room compelled him to open his eyelids, and the weariness remaining after his short sleep continued in a pleasant form his fatigue of the night before—continued, too, the emotion of his night of love, making him incapable of turning his mind upon himself, of remembering.

Hawa came to tell him it was time to rise. Immediately after his ablutions and his morning prayer he was to load his donkey and receive the commands of his father. The negress was happy. Goha was going to earn his living; the future was assured. Besides, it had been at Hawa's insistence that Haj Mahmoud had consented to lend his son, as initial stock, ten sacks of beans and an old donkey to carry them.

"You won't have much to do," he said to Goha when the latter had come for his instructions. "I have had proof that the trade of street food-seller is too complicated for you, and I have chosen you a much simpler one. Lead your beast wherever you like, and to whoever asks for a *kadah* you will give a *kadah*; to whoever asks for half a *kadah* you will give half a *kadah*. Above all, don't let yourself be cheated in the measure."

"I understand," said Goha, and he went out.

The street was already very animated. Goha, who hated crowds, avoided the populous quarters. He chose the least frequented roads, undertaking considerable detours in his desire to be alone. He followed the Khalig.

This tributary of the Nile, crossing Cairo from the south-west to the north-east, was bordered with houses, mostly those of the well-to-do. The houses overhung the river and were reflected in clear outline. Nothing could be less uniform than these two river fronts. One saw wide verandahs on piles, mausoleums, narrow stone stairways whose lower steps were submerged, and where at the hours of prayer men came to wash. Between two buildings, overreaching the walls, a red gum-tree spread its tufted branches, while in the distance thin palms hung at the tops of grey stems.

Goha did not cry his merchandise. He was leaving the city behind him as fast as possible. He trailed the donkey by the halter, and the rare passers-by were amazed to meet a merchant on such an uncommercial way. Before him spread the arcades of an aqueduct. Reaching Masr Atika he crossed the Khalig on a wooden foot-bridge and went in the direction of Bulak. He followed the Nile, where sailing barques slowly glided with cargoes of pottery. Here and there in the distance rose a date palm. A crow circled in the air, croaking. It swooped down to the road and alighted on the fallen trunk of an acacia. Goha picked up a stone and took aim. The bird, struck in the side, fell squawking. Goha seized it by the feet, found the scarcely bleeding wound, and pursued his way.

The sun overhung the landscape. Goha was walking by his donkey, holding the wounded crow in his hand. Ten minutes' walk away he saw a pink and white village, like an irregular heap of little cubes. All around him grey tufts of palm-trees made dark blots on the ground the size of a hand. On the banks two banyans spread their drooping branches whose tips dipped in the stream. Goha, who was thirsty, thought that in this village he would find water to refresh himself. He quickened his step. As he approached he anticipated shady corners. Soon he

was beneath the enormous fig-trees, and he wiped his forehead. To his right, on the steps of a whitewashed cabin, three women were looking at him, laughing. They were standing up against the door, holding each other by the hand, one tunic of blue voile, two tunics of red voile. They had lively eyes and white teeth. Their hard breasts pointed beneath the stuff, their bare feet were pressed together. One of them made a sign.

"It's for us?" she called. "It's for us—the crow?"

The three women laughed. Goha approached them, laughing too, and, knowing the use to which they would put the crow:

"The blood hasn't run," he said; "you can all three wash with it."

"Then you are giving it to us?"

"Take it. But the down will grow on you just the same!"

The fellaha in blue took the crow from his hands. Goha begged her to give him a drink. She entered the cabin, returned, and handed him a mouthless pitcher, very damp. Drops of cold water dripped on his feet.

When Goha was again on his way under the burning sun he regretted the cluster of verdure he was leaving behind. His clothes clung to his skin, he felt a burning pain on his eyelids.

As this discomfort grew he lost his peace of mind. He remembered with dismay the duties of his charge, the severe recommendations of Mahmoud. Halting suddenly, he cried:

"Beans! Beans!"

Once, twice, he repeated his cry. The donkey was trotting ahead; he resumed his march. The road wound through absolutely deserted fields. Goha did not mind. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"Beans! No one wants beans? . . . Who wants



beans? Here are beans! . . . Who wants beans? I sell beans! . . .”

Goha chanted in a grave voice; the weariness of his muscles had dulled at the sound of this music drawn from his soul. But he still sought instinctively for a more perfect cadence with which to time his steps and order his movements:

“I sell beans! . . . Who wants beans? . . . Here are beans! . . .”

And Goha felt he had been on his way for ever on an endless road. It was with the full weight of this confidence that he ran into a thicket of dwarf palms mixed with cacti. Astonished, he looked at his donkey, which in turn questioned its master. Seeing him hesitate, the animal, with one shake of its back, unburdened itself of its load and pack-saddle and rolled in the dust.

“As you like,” said Goha, sitting down in the shade of a cactus. He considered his donkey curiously.

He possessed it. . . . He could beat it, even kill it. This animal owed him obedience and respect. . . . Nevertheless, how many times in his life had he not himself been treated like a donkey? This brotherhood, differentiated by a slight hierarchy, interested him. And at once all that he owed of protection to this inferior member of his race appeared to him. He patted it with his hand and, to express his whole sentiment, his solicitude and at the same time his superiority, he said in a voice tinged with emotion:

“You—you are a little Goha.”

At this moment a young fellah who was passing slipped his hand into one of the sacks and pulled out a bean.

“Let me weigh it,” said Goha.

The child ran away with a burst of laughter that put the peddler into a mad rage.

“What!” he said. “You are taking my bean without paying for it! Give it back to me!”

He rose to pursue the thief, who ran away at top speed. "Crook ! Bandit !" he cried, but after a five-minute race he stopped and sat on the ground to regain his breath. Then he slowly returned to his bush. He walked round it, looked on all sides, but he sought his vegetables and his donkey in vain : all had disappeared.

In consternation he thought of what he should do. The road was deserted as far as he could see. But before him rose a very high wall that gave him an idea : practical jokers had pulled the donkey behind the wall perhaps.

He climbed the wall. Hundreds of lemon-trees, orange-trees, tangerine-trees perfumed the atmosphere. Roses in profusion lined formal walks, on which strolled peacocks and pink ibises. Jets of water splashed into basins, birds sang in the branches. Goha told himself that if his donkey had strayed among the clumps of greenery it would be difficult to discover it. Nevertheless he took a path at random, dazzled by the gorgeous scene. Suddenly he stopped. Voices reached him distinctly.

"Now stand up and untie your tresses."

For a moment Goha hesitated. Between the leaves shone a phosphorescent sheet. He approached, and saw a great basin of porphyry, framed with banyans and tangled brush. A little nude girl was bathing in the water. A grizzled man with hard face, wearing a sumptuous robe, was stretched on a rug. He was saying :

"Don't you hear a noise ? "

"No, my lord. . . ."

"That's good. I thought someone had dared to venture here."

Goha, had he understood, would have made off, but, absorbed in the idea of recapturing his beast, he approached. The old man was speaking amorously :

"Allah ! You are the most beautiful of my wives ; the most beautiful daughter of Islam ! "

Without answering, she poured over her body the clear water she raised in her two hands. Enthusiastically he exclaimed :

“ You made a movement and I saw the whole world ! . . . ”

“ Did you see my donkey ? ” cried Goha, leaping toward him.

The girl, surprised nude, gave a cry of distress and plunged into the water to her chin to hide herself as much as possible. As for the mameluke, he was livid with rage.

“ Your donkey ? ” he roared. “ Your donkey ? . . . ”

He seized Goha and lashed him with his horsewhip.

“ What are you doing in my garden ? ”

“ I was looking for my donkey. ”

“ Your donkey, wretched liar ? Your donkey in my garden ? ”

He raised his scimitar, gave the intruder a blow in the back with the flat of it, seized him by the knot of hair that grew on the top of his head and was preparing to cut his throat.

“ What is your name ? Who are you ? ”

“ I am Goha. . . . ”

As if by magic the mameluke's face lighted up, his arm fell, and in a rough but sympathetic voice he said :

“ You are Goha ? ”

Losing his terror, Goha put his hand to his breast.

“ Where is Goha ? ” he cried. “ Where is Goha ? Here he is ! ”

The mameluke interrupted him, laughing.

“ Ha ! Ha ! It is you, all right. There are many stories going the rounds about you. It would be too bad to kill you. ”

“ You wanted to kill me ? ”

“ Yes. ”

Goha stepped back timidly from this man who disposed

of his life with so much assurance. But, retaken by worry over his loss, he stammered :

“ You won’t tell me where my donkey is ? ”

He was then permitted to explain his misadventure. The mameluke at once put horsemen on the trail of the marauders. Less than an hour later they returned, bringing back the lost animal. But the bags of beans had eluded all search.

“ It doesn’t matter,” said the mameluke. “ Goha is my friend. Give him in place of his beans the two finest sheep in my flock.”

Turning to Goha, “ Slaughter them in my name,” he said, and touching him on the shoulder with the tip of his horsewhip, he dismissed him.

With his donkey and his two sheep Goha found himself on the road. It wound white and narrow, hugging the fields covered with dry grass. Staring before him, without caring whether his sentence had any sense now that his merchandise was gone, Goha chanted in his earnest voice :

“ I sell beans ! . . . Who wants beans ? . . . Here are beans ! . . . ”

And as he sang he saw the girl surprised in the marble basin, then he saw the three fellahas dressed in red and blue before the door of the light coloured cabin partly covered by the shadow of the fig-trees. But these visions did not content him, they seemed to him secondary ; they led him toward an obscure memory wherein something awaited him.

“ I sell beans ! . . . ”

A slow *dahabeah* glided in front of the motionless trees on the bank. Labourers worked a *shadoof* and buffaloes, with their feet in the stream, gazed stupidly about them. With heavy steps Goha walked along the Nile. Like a motionless picture projected on a screen over which

innumerable other, closer, more colourful images passed in rapid succession without effacing it, he saw within the depths of himself a pale face with black tousled hair. This face obsessed him, for he could not give it a name nor place it among the encounters of his life. Suddenly he felt sure he was going to recognise it, but again his brain was invaded by blue and red phantoms. It was no longer the three fellahas ; it was a crowd of fellahas who came to laugh in his ears and to offer him every kind of provocation. He wanted to push them away with his arms, but they clung to him. Then they disappeared.

They left Goha in a state of extreme agitation. His impatience to learn what he was on the point of learning drove him to despair. He breathed noisily, lengthened his stride. In the growing tumult of his being he seized one name, one cry : Sheika ! Sheika ! But this name did not evoke the statue ; it awoke a flood of accumulated tender emotions, memories without form, very sweet. . . . Sheika ! It was his whole power to love that found expression in this word.

He crossed a palm grove most of whose trees were loaded with a heavy harvest. Rare among the females rose the male palm. Twenty, thirty, forty mates surrounded the master, bowed a little with the weight of their maternity.

“ Who wants beans ? . . . Who wants beans ? . . . ”

As he walked, Goha still sang. It was by snatches, wearily. The pale face with its black hair was defining itself within him. Goha saw a white terrace, a prone woman and a form that was himself. Above the group the face with the black hair spoke, smiled—and it must be like that of the recumbent woman, whose features were vague. Goha said, “ It is the sheika. . . . ” But he had a feeling that it was not altogether that—that he was the victim of a confusion such as one finds in dreams. His



vision, too, seemed to him as far removed from his real life as a dream . . . and he sang no longer.

Thousands of circles whirled in space before his eyes. His heart felt heavy. The outward scene weighed in him like a stone. Goha could not understand what was happening to him. He felt mistrustful of this mysterious sensation.

Suddenly he bumped into a tree.

It was an awakening, but a disagreeable one. He looked for his donkey and saw it a hundred feet behind. The effort required to go after it appalled his weariness. He wept.

He wiped his eyes, visibly anxious to hide his grief from the beast that followed him. From his sadness there remained an immense need to be tender. He put his arm on his donkey's neck and held in his hand one of the long ears. He would have liked to speak to this living being, to this subordinate brother fated to share his existence. But Goha spoke only with caution to animals: he feared he would not seem acute enough for a man. Finding nothing to say, he repeated the morning's sentence:

"You—you are a little Goha."

The animal quickened its steps, for, despite his manifestations of friendship, its master had forgotten to feed and water it. The two sheep galloped ahead. It was thus the son of Mahmoud traversed the city. His donkey and he walked side by side; at times their eyes, equally vague, met, and one felt that a strong movement of the spirit drew those two simple creatures one toward the other.

Arriving before his house, Goha had all the trouble in the world gathering his flock. First he had to run after the sheep, that had started for the desert. Having brought them back, he found his donkey, which had followed him going, had not followed him coming back. It had been



detained by a few blades of dry grass. Not wanting to let go the sheep, he dragged them each by one hand ; but having reached the donkey, he found himself without a free hand to seize the halter. Nevertheless, with cries, manœuvres and blows of a stick he succeeded in disciplining his beasts and getting them into the courtyard. Hawa, Zeinab, Mahmoud came running up to learn the result of this first day, and did not hide their astonishment when they learned what it was. Questioned at length, Goha gave an account of his adventures that satisfied none of his family, and Mahmoud spent the evening wondering by what sly trick his son, having gone out with beans, possessed on his return two magnificent sheep.

## XXII

### THE SECOND NIGHT

NIGHT came. Mahmoud, his wives, his daughters and his slaves retired to their rooms. As for Goha, he had a moment of indecision. He wanted to go up to the terrace, but he felt he ought to do it secretly. So he pretended to go to sleep, and that without any intention of deceiving his family, but only in response to an inward suggestion. His ruse, aimed at no one, was only a movement of his soul bearing its end within itself. When the house was quite silent he rose, took the stairs, and noiselessly emerged under the clear sky.

A woman dressed in yellow beckoned to him. He saw it was she whom he had sought all day in his heart. Smiling, he waved his arms above his head. He approached the balustrade and cleared it.

The city was blue; the minarets pointed to the sky like fingers.

“Sidi, may your night be blessed! . . .”

“May your night be blessed! . . .”

“Let us sit down. . . . We might be seen from the street. . . . I thought of you; my thoughts followed you everywhere. . . . I had a mat laid down. . . . Look! . . .”

They lay on the mat. Goha pressed against the young woman, clasped her with violent, uneasy joy, and buried his face in the silk-draped bosom, as if to weep. Nour al-Ein was surprised.

“What is the matter?” she asked curiously.

Nothing remained in her manner or her voice of the

anger that had moved her until the moment when she mounted to the terrace. She continued tenderly :

“ You are sad. . . . Don't you want to see me ? ”

He lifted his head.

“ Don't you want to see me ? ”

“ I want to see you. . . . Yes. . . . Let me see you.”

He looked at her lingeringly, silently. Her hair was crazily tousled. He felt a need of plunging his hands into it, of intoxicating himself with its movement, its disorder, then to race on the terrace, yelling his loudest. His fever fell when he saw that Nour al-Ein was motionless. He contemplated her face. Its pattern was of such purity that it hurt him. A wrinkle, an imperfection would have relieved him. He tried to detach himself, but he did not succeed. His eyes were invincibly attracted by eyes of a blue so deep they made his head reel, like abysses. Unconsciously, leaning on his elbow, he approached this centre of attraction. Nour al-Ein thought he was claiming a caress. She gave him a kiss on the lips, and the spell was broken.

He sat up while she remained prone, and placed a finger on Nour al-Ein's foot.

“ Here,” he said with feverish gaiety, “ this is your foot ! . . . Here it is. . . . ”

He took Nour al-Ein's hand, caressed it and said with enthusiasm :

“ This is your hand.”

She was at once disconcerted and charmed by this naïve admiration. To captivate him she had prepared gestures and words that now she felt were useless. Having understood the vanity of artifice, she returned to the simplicity of her love.

“ How beautiful you are ! . . . ” she said, clasping Goha to her heart.

Of her long months of waiting, of vexations and hate,

she retained only a trace that was slowly fading. Goha, whom in her indignation she had believed terrible and cynical, belonged to a more humble race. Far from waning in contact with so much innocence, her passion grew laughing and free. The feebleness of mind she sensed in him attached her to him as to a pretty pet.

"Listen, Goha. . . . You haven't told me yet what you did to-day. . . . Were you faithful? You didn't deceive me? You swear it?"

"I took my donkey," he said, "and I sold beans. . . ."

"You are making fun of me," she cried gaily. "You didn't sell beans!"

He shuddered and answered in a jerky voice:

"Ah! You knew? I was robbed. . . . Ten sacks belonging to my father. . . . Besides, I brought back two sheep. . . . I don't know how it happened. . . . There was a wall. . . . So you knew I didn't sell my beans? . . ."

"What do you mean?" asked Nour al-Ein.

Suddenly she laughed nervously.

"Bean-seller? You?"

But Goha was pursuing his thoughts:

"You saw me? . . . Yes, it's true . . . since you were with me. . . . I remember now," he added, striking his forehead, "you were with me."

"With you? Where was I when you met me?"

"You were with me there, yes, there before my eyes, and there, there," he said, his hand on his breast, "and also on the ground. . . ."

"On the ground?"

"Sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other side, sometimes behind, sometimes in front . . . because you were walking with me. . . ."

"But you are crazy! I didn't go out all day. . . . It was my thought that followed you."

He did not lose his assurance, instinctively giving an explanation for everything :

“ Your thought ? Well, yes . . . your thought. Tell me . . . what is it like, your thought that followed me ? ”

“ But I have never seen it ! ” exclaimed Nour al-Ein, laughing in spite of the uneasiness she felt at these strange questions. “ Thoughts are of air. Do you know what it is like ? ”

He made a little mysterious sign and in a low voice confided :

“ It is grey, your thought. . . . It is grey. . . . ”

This revelation impressed Nour al-Ein. Should she treat her lover like a fool, and laugh at his words ? . . . The face of Goha, with its half-open lips, its dilated pupils, was that of a mystic, and Nour al-Ein understood that he was the possessor of a marvellous secret. Timidly she stammered :

“ How do you know that ? ”

“ I saw it,” he murmured.

He too was impressed by what he had just said. Since he had noticed that beings have shadows that follow them everywhere, and that these shadows are grey, he had imparted his discovery to no one. But all that had become confused in his mind. To-night he wanted to revive these memories for Nour al-Ein, to initiate her into the mystery. He remembered the shadow that had accompanied him so long. Where did it come from ? Whom did it belong to ? He sought an image, a relation difficult to connect, a vanished vision. . . .

“ You were in the garden,” he said.

She could not guess of what garden he spoke, and asked him to explain. He continued without answering her question :

“ You were always seated. . . . When I walked, your thought walked with me. . . . ”

"Seated! . . . Me? In a garden?"

Goha murmured sadly:

"Then you went away. . . . I looked for you. . . ."

She believed he was recalling the mournful weeks that had followed their first meeting in the library, or at least she wanted to believe it, for she was eager to end this mysterious discussion that perturbed her.

"It was I who waited for you, my love," she protested gently, joining her lips to those of her friend.

"Look! Look!"

Nour al-Ein raised her eyes. Goha was indicating a point in the sky.

"It is all over," he said.

At once his hand became animated. He exclaimed again:

"Look! Look!"

"Don't talk so loud! . . . Allah! How loud you talk! Yes, I saw. . . . They are falling stars."

At intervals of a few seconds meteors furrowed the sky in every direction. They traced curves of fire above the city. Goha and Nour al-Ein became absorbed in waiting for them and in announcing their fall.

"Look! It just went out on the point of the minaret."

"There are genii in the air," said Nour al-Ein.

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. . . . There are always genii in the air. . . . But to-night they must have committed some misdeed. . . . Allah, protect us!"

"Allah, protect us!" repeated Goha.

"Another one! How it falls!"

"Could it fall on us?" asked Goha, pressing against the girl.

"No, it falls only on the genii. . . ."

"Where are the genii? Show them to me. . . ."

"I can't show them to you. . . . They can't be seen.



. . . But those stars are blocks of fire that fell on evil genii. . . .”

“Ah! And who throws them?”

“The angels of paradise. . . .”

“They are bad. . . .”

Nour al-Ein shuddered.

“Ah, don’t say that!” she whispered. “If the Nabi heard you! . . . You have just committed a terrible sin. . . .”

“Don’t worry,” answered Goha in a quiet voice. “It is of no importance. . . .”

“What has no importance?”

“What I say. . . .”

“And why?”

“Because I am an idiot. . . . The Nabi does not get angry with idiots. . . . That is what the sheik said to Waddah Alysum, and I heard. . . .”

Nour al-Ein laughed uneasily.

“Listen,” she said, after a pause, “I am going to explain it to you . . . I learned it in the Koran. You learned it too, but you have forgotten it. . . . On certain nights the genii beat their wings and fly away. . . . They hide in the gardens of paradise, each behind a tree, and they listen to steal the word of Allah. . . . Don’t ask me what they are seeking. Perhaps to steal the secret of destinies. Perhaps something else. . . . The word of Allah is full of prodigies. . . . But the guardians do not sleep. . . . They take blocks of fire in their hands and throw them at the genii. . . .”

Goha burst out laughing.

“That’s good. . . . Ha! Ha! The angels of paradise are clever as monkeys. . . . That’s good! I’m glad!”

“There go some! . . . There go some more! . . . More! . . . I want more!” cried Nour al-Ein in a hoarse voice.

A frenzy of fanaticism was seizing her. Fist extended, face full of hate, she continued :

“ Kill them ! . . . Destroy them ! . . . More ! . . . More ! . . . Crush them ! . . . ”

She stopped, gasping : a vision had suddenly imposed itself on her mind. “ More ! . . . More ! . . . ” she stammered, but the words had a horrible effect. The fellaha who had been stoned in the public square revived before her eyes, twisted under the torture, her cries like an omen.

She shivered, and at the same time a breeze ruffled the trees of the garden. The moon disappeared behind a little silver cloud. The stars were no longer falling.

“ There are no more blocks of fire,” said Goha.

“ The genii are dead,” said Nour al-Ein.

He was lying on his back, wide-eyed. She bent over him to supplant the night in his eyes. She took his head in her arms, interposing herself between him and the sky, limiting with her body her lover's view. Their breaths mingled in the dark and narrow enclosure of arms, shoulders and heads.

“ To-morrow I can't come,” said Nour al-Ein softly.

## XXIII

### THE SHEIKA IN THE YELLOW DRESS

THE passers-by who recognised Goha told themselves he was more abstracted than usual. He held his donkey by the tail and followed it docilely. Reaching a square, the donkey stopped for no reason, and Goha stopped too. They had been there a few minutes when a file of five dromedaries crossed the square and turned to the right. The dromedaries were loaded with clover. Dragging its master along, the donkey trotted behind them. It soon caught up to them and, adjusting its pace to that of the animals, began to crop the bits of clover that escaped from the great nets hanging at their flanks. One of the drovers noticed it.

“Brother,” he said, addressing Goha, “pass ahead or take your place behind, because your beast is eating my clover.”

Receiving no answer, he gave the donkey’s nose a blow with his fist, that set it to galloping. What it had done with the first dromedary the donkey did with the second. A new drover had to interfere and, proceeding as had his fellow, he sped the donkey forward. Pushed from one to the other, it found itself at last at the head of the procession, and turned sharply into a side road. Half-an-hour later it had led its master to the populous and noisy quarter of the prostitutes.

Goha was dreaming of the night before. Around him, like a presence, floated his second night of love. His consciousness wavered between two worlds, that which opened on a clear morning and that which was sheltered in the twilight of his memory.

Unable to choose between the dream and life, he remained in a strange region, neither one nor the other. The street was in movement; the ruts he avoided by clinging to his donkey's tail were abysses or mountains, indifferently. The face of the houses was illusory; he felt certain he could pass through it. Men who seemed tiny a few steps away became monstrous as he passed them. A melon rind on the roadway was as large as an ox and the pillar that supported the balcony of a house was thin as a straw. He felt in the calves of his legs a pain that seemed strange to him. He tramped on it as he walked. And he seemed to feel gaping holes in his body. "They are water-skins," he mused. Abstractedly he repeated several times: "They are water-skins."

At times a precise gesture or word emerged from his dream, then suddenly all the outer noises subsided and he received that word in silence; the street became no more than a blue shadow wherein he saw moving the white arm of a woman. As these visions returned, weights buried themselves in the hollow of his breast: the water-skins were filling up.

Sudden laughter broke out at his ears. A woman dressed in red, her eyelids greasy with paint, was holding him by the arm.

"Don't you hear, idiot? Don't you hear what we're telling you? What makes you so proud? Is it your pretty face or your pretty clothes?"

Other girls emerged from sordid houses and approached. Some leaned out of windows.

"What does he want?"

"He sells beans."

"The devil take him, I like him!"

"Look at his lips! Aren't they beautiful? . . ."

"And his eyes!"

"He doesn't answer. . . . Allah, what a fool! . . ."

Goha said nothing. He liked the anomaly of his state, and to remain in it, so as not to fall back into reality, he strove feverishly to keep alive within him the scattered memories of the night before.

"Do you want to come up to my room?"

"I'm the one you prefer, eh, beautiful eyes?"

"Come, answer. . . . Do you want to go up to her room or to mine?"

A fat woman held by the hand a ten-year-old girl and was shouldering herself through the group.

"He is too young for us," she said. "Your frog-skin disgusts him. . . . He wants a skin of almonds and pistachios. . . . Here, my boy, taste this duckling and tell me how you like her."

She pushed her daughter into Goha's arms, a thin, swarthy little one, who laughed with the pleasantly shrill laugh of amused children.

"Look, mother, he is scared!" she said, clapping her hands.

Goha took his donkey by the bridle and tried to follow his round. The lane was so narrow the big woman alone barred the way. She stuck to her place, and Goha would have remained there until evening if a fellah had not appeared at the corner of the street. At once the prostitutes ran toward the new-comer and then the son of Haj Mahmoud was able to move on. He ran into a girl squatting at her doorstep and stepped on her feet. She began to howl, then changed her mind.

"It doesn't matter," she murmured, seizing him by the bottom of his gallabiah. "It doesn't matter. . . . Come in. I won't ask you for much."

A little farther on two rather pretty young women, supple in their pink tunics, came toward him arm in arm.

"We are sisters and we share profits."

"Well," answered Goha sullenly, "I will take neither the one nor the other! If you don't want to buy my beans, let me alone."

His angry tone amused the girls. They barred his way and tried to start a conversation. They stroked his cheeks, complimented him on his round face and great chest. Won by these friendly advances Goha stretched nervously, yawned and smiled at the two sisters, who were watching him curiously. Still saturated with his dream, drunk with the memory of the woman with the tousled hair, he found the girls extremely ugly. He was moved by their ugliness as though it were a proof of their sympathy. Besides, because he was happy, he thought them pleasant and kind. Doubtless they expected brotherly effusions from him. In his simplicity he thought nothing would please them more than to hear his confidences.

"Listen," he said, taking each by the arm, "I am going to tell you the truth. You are nice . . . yes . . . both of you are nice. But you haven't seen the one who came to the terrace. . . . Oh, my brain! . . . She is the cream!"

He took his head between his hands, smacked his tongue and repeated:

"Cream and rose-water."

A few women had joined the group. They burst into laughter at sight of this enthusiastic lover. The newcomers questioned the others with their eyes, seeking to guess the cause of their amusement. Goha, radiant-faced, spoke with slow gestures:

"When she walks she goes like this. . . . Allah! Allah! Cream and rose-water!"

Excited by this memory he slapped the back of his neck, gave his donkey a push and, without any other transition, began to call at the top of his voice:



"Here the beans! . . . Green the beans!"

The women clung to him, asking him questions. He answered only with his cry: "Here the beans! . . . Green the beans!" Then they conceived the idea of expressing their sympathy by buying up his whole donkey-load at once. Not one of them evaded this cordial manifestation. "One *kadah*. . . Half a *kadah*." Arms were extended from every direction.

"Softly, softly," stammered Goha, without concealing his joy. He weighed, packed, weighed again, packed some more. The contents of one basket were exhausted; he opened the second, and soon was dismayed to reach the bottom. He had thought it would be thus for ever!

"Are you satisfied?" asked the elder of the sisters. "You never sold so much before. And now, may your evening be blessed!"

"Come back and see us," added the younger; "we'll buy your beans."

Both sacks empty and his purse full, Goha left the prostitutes. He was not sorry to do so, for despite the noise, despite his own excitement, he had recovered within himself the past night, intact.

The muezzins were calling the faithful to prayer. Goha led his donkey to the shadow of a wall, tied it to a copper ring set in the stone for that purpose, and entered the mosque. He went first to the inner court, in which is the fountain for ablutions. He washed his feet, his head, his arms, and thus purified, he prostrated himself in the hall of the sanctuary.

When he went out into the street he found his donkey lying down. Feeling tired, he stretched out beside it and, his head resting against the animal's shoulder, closed his eyes.

He did not go to sleep; visions in which unrolled his whole love life assailed him. There were laughing eyes

that reminded him of mornings in the fields and of joyous fellahas ; there were nervous arms that reminded him of the Bedouins' tents, and especially of the thirteen-year-old girl he found eating figs one day ; and there was Hawa.

Above all, there was she who had most enraptured him, the woman of cream and rose-water who, without his knowing whence she came, visited him on the terrace. Goha loved her best, and longest.

The black head stirred in him the memory of the sheika. There was no resemblance, it is true, between Isis and Nour al-Ein, but it was only with the features of the latter that Goha evoked the statue whose face had faded from his mind. The idea of the one had combined with the image of the other. Why ? Perhaps for no reason. Perhaps because since the disappearance of the statue Goha had never lost hope of finding it again. Perhaps because the shadow that followed him was at once the genii and the grey thought of Nour al-Ein. Perhaps because both were incomprehensible to him. In any event, he gave them the same name and the same face. He loved the woman who had been lost and found again—the sheika in the yellow dress.

## XXIV

### THE THIRD NIGHT

**H**AWA was pleased with Goha. If for two days he had sold nothing, at least the preceding days had been especially fruitful—two magnificent sheep, a hundred and sixty pieces of copper, such were the proceeds of his business transactions. The negress was satisfied with this result, and from it augured so beautiful a future that her bigness seemed almost a providential favour. Goha, her support, was becoming a real man, worthy to make himself a home. She would arrange to have him make her his wife or his concubine; she would have a house, a garden; she would possess slaves, four, three. . . .

“Yes, three slaves are quite enough,” she said aloud. “Those people would spend their days doing nothing if you didn’t watch them. It is a question of imposing on them, of being hard, and above all . . .”

Stretched on her mat, eyes open, she did not finish her sentence, for she had just heard a muffled step in the antechamber. Suspicious and wary she held her breath and, in spite of the darkness, recognised Goha’s silhouette. “It isn’t natural,” she thought. “And, in the first place, he goes up there every night. . . . I thought it was to breathe the fresh air. . . . You thought! You thought! . . . Idiot! Can you explain why he hides? . . . The truth is that the boy is sly. . . . Allah protect you! Hawa, it’s a demon. . . . Something must be going on. . . . And in the first place, if something is going on, you had better know about it.”

Goha having disappeared, she waited a few minutes

and carefully arose to follow him. She mounted to the first floor, where slept Mahmoud, his wife and daughters. From there, to reach the terrace, one had to take on the landing a ladder propped against a little wooden door. It was closed at night, but Goha had opened it. She could see a square of sky dotted with stars. Reaching the last rung, Hawa put out her head, turned it on all sides, and saw no one. She advanced on the terrace.

A cry, coming from the street, made her tremble. She remembered that the eldest daughter of their neighbour, Abd Allah, had died the evening before. The rumour was that it was a shaitan who had strangled her because she had imprudently been left alone in her room for a minute during the week of her confinement. The subterranean genie would certainly have killed her child as well if someone hadn't come in at the very moment when he was approaching it. Hawa<sup>a</sup> halted to think on this misfortune.

"She was pretty," she said, speaking to herself. "She was pretty, she was rich. . . . Does one leave a mother alone before the seventh day? And in the first place, everybody knows the shaitans are watching for us. . . ."

In the mortuary chamber the women continued to lament. Hawa nodded her head.

"They are right," she murmured. "Some are born, others die. . . . Some are young, others are old. . . . Some are sad, others are happy. . . . Allah alone is great."

Howls interrupted her meditations.

"That is the mother of her who is no more," she said. "It takes a mother to grieve as she is grieving, poor pigeon."

Overcome by emotion she was about to cry out too when she heard mysterious whisperings on the terrace itself. Lest she give the alarm by manifesting her despair

she tore her bodice in token of mourning, not without making sure it would be easy to mend the next day.

She now was free to give her attention to Goha. In order to inspect the place without being seen she concealed herself behind a pile of wicker cages. She was not long in discovering the sheik's house, Goha, and a woman whose back and neck alone she could see. Without a doubt he was deceiving her with one of Sheik al-Zaki's slaves—Amina, Yasmine, or another. Between the lamentations she could catch these few sentences :

"You came up yesterday, my love ? But don't you remember I had explained to you ? . . ."

"Me, I said : 'Where is the sheika ? Where is the sheika ?'"

"The sheika ? . . ." the woman repeated gaily. "You like that name ? And if I call you sheik ?"

There was laughter.

"There, I was right," thought Hawa. "Some are sad, others are gay. Below they are weeping, up here they are laughing."

"No ! No !" the woman repeated. "You are my jewel that I love ; you are mine, all mine, are you not ? . . ."

Goha's answer was covered by the lamentations. Soon afterward Hawa could again follow the colloquy :

"Oh, you can't know !" the woman was saying. "Why am I afraid ? Because I am mad about you. . . ."

"I too, and I am not afraid. . . ."

"Oh, my darling, how foolish you are ! How foolish you are ! How I love you ! If you desert me, do you know, I'll kill you !"

Goha burst out laughing.

"Kill me ? You ? But you are tiny, tiny, tiny. . . ."

"How I like you, darling ! . . . Why do I like you ?"

"Because you are tiny, tiny, tiny. . . ."

“Hush ! . . . I am afraid. . . . What if I went away ? ”

“Oh, no ! . . . Stay ! stay ! . . . ”

Hawa shuddered. Never had she known in Goha that passionate voice. The pleas addressed to a rival, while they aroused her jealousy, gave her an intimate, sensuous pleasure.

“Put your arms around me,” the woman was saying. “Your soul is like a jasmine. . . . It is white.”

In the chamber of death the number of weepers had grown. Answering their frenzied lamentations the shrill sound of a flute came from the desert, seeming to speak to a mysterious encircling audience.

Hawa caught signs of anxiety in the woman. She moved away from Goha, made a movement as if to get up, stammered sentences in which ceaselessly returned the words, “I am afraid ! I am afraid ! ” But Goha held her back by the arm. “Stay ! stay longer ! ” Fearful, undecided, she turned her head toward him, questioning him with her eyes.

The negress recognised Nour al-Ein.

She remained stupefied for a moment. Then she swung both hands to mark her surprise and the birth in her of an emotion. She murmured, “Nour al-Ein ! ” repeated the name several times, firmly to fix the essential point of what she had discovered and what she felt, to lay in some way the foundation of her disgust. At last she spoke, varying her intonations : “It is Nour al-Ein, my sister—yes, my dear—it is she—with her eye. By Allah ! It is Nour al-Ein—the wife of the venerable sheik—of the white-bearded sheik. It is Nour al-Ein, with a young man.” She assumed an air of ironical pity. “And why not ? Goha is handsome. . . . Poor thing, she has an old husband. Leave her alone ; she is so nice, the poor quail. . . . ” Having thus spoken she frowned, stiffened her arm, and with an imperious and hard gesture :



"Enough! Enough! All this is shameful. Nour al-Ein is a wanton. And in the first place, everybody in town will know it to-morrow."

Meanwhile Nour al-Ein turns, shivering:

"Look, darling! . . . there is someone! . . . My God! My God!"

She has heard a noise, a light, muffled laugh. . . . She has seemed to catch a shadow, the gleam of a look. Hawa, fearing discovery and satisfied with her observations, regains the ladder.

"I swear to you there is someone! . . ."

"Where? I don't see anything. . . ."

"There!" she says, stretching out her arm. "Go there! Hurry! . . ."

He rises, makes for the terrace of his house, circles it, moves a basket, a wicker cage.

"There is no one," he says, raising his voice.

"Lower down, lower down!"

The far-off flute grew more enthralling, stopped for a long pause, then resumed the interrupted note. At the same time, from very near, rose the lamentations. Nour al-Ein, raising her body, saw distinctly through the balustrade, in the narrow space separating Mahmoud's house from Abd Allah's, a dozen women in the light of a lantern seated on a mat. They were twisting their arms and striking their heads.

"I won't come any more," said Nour al-Ein. "For a week I won't come, because the cries of the weepers would drive me crazy. When the week is past I will return; eh, darling?"

"Yes," he answered, without understanding, allowing himself to be soothed by the melodious voice.

"Only you, you will visit the sheik and I will see you through the window and through the partition of the antechamber."

“ Yes, I’ll come . . . yes . . . the partition of the antechamber.”

“ You are like a child, Goha, like a little child. . . .”

“ You are like me, the same thing. . . .”

“ How the same thing ? You always say words I don’t understand. . . .”

They stopped speaking. Goha’s head rested on Nour al-Ein’s breast. She was uneasy. Each time the cry of the weepers rose she started, and often she turned her head sharply, surprised by a noise, attracted by a shadow.

The moon was low ; at the level of the houses, the breeze came in puffs, irregular as gasps. . . . Nour al-Ein, still oppressed, thought of going down, escaping, but she was afraid of grieving Goha, who, very calm, was smiling with half-closed eyes. When he raised his eyelids to look at her she responded to his confidence with a smile.

He murmured some unintelligible words. She asked, “ What did you say ? ” Having answered with a sentence she did not understand, he quietly went to sleep. His slumber was light and his expression radiant.

Never had Nour al-Ein felt herself so moved as at this moment.

## XXV

### THE DISHONOURED MAN

**G**OHA wanted to avoid his mother's greeting, Mahmoud's solemn voice, the piercing cries of his nine sisters, and the black and flat face of Hawa. He waited in his room until the family had assembled for the morning meal and, sure of passing unnoticed, he went to the stable. He loaded his animal without talking to it, as was his custom, and without currying it. He was eager to get far away—at the foot of the Mokattam, or under the trees of Ghezireh.

He was preparing to go out when a giggle made him start. Leaning against the door the negress had fixed on him eyes shining with hate. "What a shame!" she thought. "What a head he has! Is a man permitted to have a head like that? Does a man who respects himself have a head like that?" Goha also was silent and the same hate dilated his pupils. At last he took his donkey by the halter and went out. Silent, impenetrable, the negress had not moved.

Goha went his way with great strides. He was in a state of crazy anxiety. He gave violent taps to his donkey's rump, tickled its ears, kissed its damp muzzle. He cried at the top of his voice, "Donkey! Donkey!" sang the word in a muffled voice, took it up again with a grave voice, and all lost itself in a burst of childish laughter. He felt as though he had escaped from a dungeon into which Hawa had locked him for days and days.

Hawa recounted what she had seen. Haj Mahmoud's family was in conference until evening. Goha and Nour al-Ein were not considered. The one had taken what

had been offered him, the other was a wanton. The shame, the dishonour was Sheik al-Zaki's. The responsibility established, the Riazys understood it would be an outrage to public morals if they kept secret such ignominy. Dallalas hurriedly called were charged with noising the scandal. The negress reserved for herself the part of informing the quarter.

"You will not go to your neighbour's any more," Mahmoud commanded his son when he returned from his rounds. "If you meet him, you will not offer him your hand, you will not look at him. In every case you will run away from him, because the dishonouring one is in his house."

In less than forty-eight hours the news made the rounds of the city. Women exclaimed, slaves spat on the ground in disgust, men shook their heads gravely and said nothing.

The students of al-Azar were waiting for the philosopher when they learned from Sayed, the orange-seller, dispatched by Hawa, that their master sheltered under his roof an adulterous wife. At once they deserted his column and grouped themselves around Sheik Abu Ali, whose teachings al-Zaki despised.

The philosopher was late. He briskly crossed the threshold of al-Azar and traversed the court with lowered head, improvising the lesson he had neglected to prepare. "I will talk to them of the absurd jurists of Maghreb," he thought, and he smiled, as he was accustomed to, at the moment of joining his pupils. A few steps from his column he raised his eyes; the flags were deserted, and over there, at the end of the court, his pupils were receiving the words of Abu Ali. Al-Zaki's heart received such a shock that he did not realise the affront. In the crowd of students and masters who were arguing or praying he sought a face to witness his astonishment; he saw only

backs. A sheik who was passing stepped aside ostentatiously. Al-Zaki, who had not ceased smiling a stupid, fixed smile, reacted sharply under the insult.

He crossed the court with a fierce air, walking straight upon groups which he forced to open up. In the street, however, he felt anguish when he saw that the shopkeepers, who usually humbly kissed the sleeves of his caftan, turned away as he passed. But pride stiffened him once more. He passed with head high, looking sharply from one to the other.

Night was beginning to fall when he arrived before his house. The tension had been too great. His ears buzzed, he felt himself weaken, and he murmured, "What is going on? What have they against me?"

He saw Goha coming from afar and went toward him, his hand extended. The son of Mahmoud gave a cry, stopped and covered his face.

Then rage rose in the master's heart. He seized Goha brutally by the arm:

"Speak! Speak! What is the matter to-day? Speak, or I'll smash your jaw!"

"Let me go!" howled Goha. "Let me go, Sheik! The dishonouring one is in your house!"

At these words Sheik al-Zaki started, and his hand fell of its own accord.

## XXVI

### THE NEIGHBOURS OF NOUR AL-EIN

**G**OHA was received into the bosom of his family with a volley of blows.

"You will never be anything but a fool!" cried Mahmoud, "a fool, a stubborn fool! I forbade you to talk to the sheik; I even forbade you to salute him! You disobeyed me!"

Goha attempted to justify himself:

"It was he who took me by the arm," he said. "I said to him. . . . He said to me. . . . Then I answered: 'The dishonouring one is in your house.'"

Faces relaxed. A discreet smile illumined every countenance. At last Mahmoud burst into laughter. It was the signal for general hilarity. The girls began to romp. Stretched on the tiles, choking with laughter, Hawa held her sides. Goha was soon infected by so much gaiety. His finger extended toward his nurse, his legs wide apart, he laughed riotously.

"Hush!" said Mahmoud, suddenly suspicious. "Is it true? You really told him, 'The dishonouring one is in your house'?"

"On my eye! On my eye! I said . . . Ha! Ha! I said . . . Ha! Ha! I . . . Ha! Ha!"

"I think . . . Allah, how tired I am! . . . I think that in all Cairo . . . Allah, give me strength to breathe! . . . Goha was the only person capable of saying such a thing to the sheik. . . ."

It was Zeinab speaking. Two days before she had given birth to a boy, and her eyes were shining with joy. Mahmoud approached her and said tenderly:



"Eh, Zeinab, your son was the only one capable of doing what he did?"

"Which of my sons?" asked Zeinab proudly.

"You are right to ask it, my dear. It is of your elder son I speak. The other one, God willing, will be more like his father. . . ."

"God grant it," repeated the women.

Zeinab brought the new-born to her bosom and tried to put her breast to its mouth. The child, already replete, seized the nipple and let go at once.

"Perhaps," said Zeinab coquettishly, addressing the infant, "perhaps, Sheik, your mother's milk is not good enough for you. . . ."

"Allah protect your breasts!" said Mahmoud. And stroking with his finger the rumpled back of the baby's neck, he added: "Eat, son of Mahmoud, eat, my dear little calf. . . ."

Hawa, Hellal, Nassim were eager to bring the conversation back to Sheik al-Zaki. Zeinab unwittingly gave the signal. She was seized again with her hysterical laugh. Mahmoud, thinking he knew the cause of it, said aloud:

"Now that he knows, we shall see if he will act like a man."

"He won't fail to," affirmed Hawa. "A venerable sheik cannot have the soul of a dog!"

"At any rate," said Zeinab, "he knows the truth now. . . . To-morrow he will send Nour al-Ein back to her father, or else he will have her stoned to death."

"I think he ought to have her stoned."

An amused silence followed these words from the implacable negress. It was twilight. In the darkness the women and girls made lighter splotches; the men, because of their dark caftans, were scarcely visible.

"He must have got home," said Nassim.

“ Who ? ”

“ The sheik.”

The approach of evening made Goha uneasy. His eyes were turning toward the kitchen that he had to cross to mount to the terrace. All these last nights he had waited in vain. The weepers still moaned at Abd Allah’s and the sheika did not come.

“ The sow will deny it ! ” suddenly exclaimed Hawa in a spiteful voice that made everybody start.

The cook, who spoke little, answered with a strong Sudanese accent :

“ He won’t be innocent enough to believe her. . . .”

Mahmoud, irritated, cried :

“ What does it matter to us what happens next door ? We have acted as we should ; we have only to wait.”

“ Mother ! ” protested Zeinab, whose condition permitted certain liberties. “ He wants to keep us from talking ! . . . Have we anything else to do ? ”

She received no answer, and soon all thoughts were absorbed in the mystery of the house next door. Through the window, with the cries of the street, came gleams of green and red.

“ I hear the melon-seller,” said Mahmoud. “ Have we any left ? ”

“ We still have forty-eight, Sidi,” answered the cook.

Hellal gave a long yawn. Nassim nudged her with her elbow and looked at her out of the corner of her eye, smiling. At this sign of understanding Hellal leaned over and, very low, slipped a word into Nassim’s ear. Zeinab and Hawa turned questioning glances on them. At last Hawa rose and came to join in the conversation that was in murmurs and muffled laughter. Zeinab, who could not rise, beckoned to Hawa, and at once was among the speakers. She confided what she had to say to her slave, who transmitted it to the others and brought the

answer back to her. As it lengthened out, this mysterious conversation became exasperatingly monotonous. Suddenly the shrill voice of Hellal rose :

"Goha," she said, "come here."

Goha was preparing to obey when Mahmoud severely commanded him to sit down again.

"Why are you angry, Sidi ?" said Zeinab in a drawling voice. "We are whispering so you won't hear our foolishness. . . . Don't cross a woman who is nursing, Sidi, if you don't want the child to drink vinegar. . . ."

Mahmoud was going to answer to quiet her, when hurried blows resounded on the garden door.

"Who can that be ?" murmured Zeinab.

"Save us from evil !" said the cook.

"God grant it !" exclaimed the wives.

"Here is the porter. . . . I wouldn't dare open the door," said Hellal.

"Why should you open it, my dear, since there is a porter ?" said Nassim.

"I said that, my dear," answered Hellal, "in case there had been no porter. . . ."

"And how could it be, my dear, that a lord like Haj Mahmoud should have no porter ?" exclaimed Nassim.

A cry arose :

"A woman ! A woman !"

The whole family had gathered around the window. Zeinab, breathless, stretched on the floor, was asking questions.

"What does she want ?"

"I don't know. . . . She is making a lot of motions."

"She has no *mellaia*. . . . By Allah ! The porter can see her hair !"

"Then it's a madwoman !"

"The porter is pushing her out, he is raising his lantern. . . ."

"Amina ! It's Amina ! Amina, Nour al-Ein's slave. Don't speak ! . . . Hush ! Listen ! . . ."

"Goha ! She is asking for Goha !"

Goha had risen in strange agitation.

"Stay where you are," commanded Hawa, with the fierce tone of a black tribal chieftain. "I'll go and talk to her myself, the strumpet !"

She opened the door with a firm movement, crossed the court and, throwing out her chest, planted herself before Amina, her arms akimbo.

"May God bless you !" said Amina. "Is Goha, your young master, here ?"

"And in the first place, yes. . . . And in the first place, who are you ?" asked Hawa.

"You know me very well, Hawa. I am Amina. . . ."

"And in the first place, what does it matter to me that you are Amina ?"

"Hawa, I beg you. . . . I have a word for Goha. . . ."

"And in the first place, I don't know if Goha is in," answered the negress. "Tell me the word. . . . I'll take the message. . . ."

"It is impossible ! . . . My God ! My God !" faltered Amina, whose lips quivered.

The negress made her voice soft, insidious :

"What is the matter this evening ? I see you are all excited. . . . Is someone ill at your house ?"

"God will reward you, Hawa. . . . Call Goha, your young and kind master, call him. . . ."

The negress suddenly unmasked her hate. With her black fists she threatened the Syrian, and, legs apart, eyes wide, neck enormous :

"Go back to your house, viper !" she shouted. "It isn't enough for you to have sullied the house of a venerable sheik ; you also want to debauch an honest boy ! Go away, you owl ! May the shaitans choke you, you and

your mistress ; may leprosy eat your skin away and may fire devour your entrails . . .”

She foamed with rage. Unable to find an imprecation worthy of her anger she seized the gardener's broom and brought it down on Amina's back. Without a protest the slave of Nour al-Ein's lowered her head and went away.

Filling the door with her thick shoulders Hawa pursued her with shouts and maledictions.

## XXVII

### THE WAY OF SORROW

THEY had spent the night in lamentations. Assembled at last to take counsel, at dawn they had made no decision. Nour al-Ein, grimacing, nervously bit her fist. Mirmah trembled ceaselessly and, grown talkative in her sorrow, sought to console Nour al-Ein with phrases consecrated to consolation. Amina was in closest communion with her mistress. She pressed against Nour al-Ein and stroked her black hair, weeping. There was also Yasmine, the negress with the pretty arms. Sitting apart, her head resting on the purple palm of her hand, she thought : " What will become of me ? "

Ibrahim the eunuch came to tell them to get ready. They received this command with wails, begging a last time for grace. The eunuch raised his whip and stung Amina's shoulders. Nour al-Ein threw herself on him, tried to scratch his face.

" Your master is the son of a dog ! " she cried.

She stopped, quaking with rage, for the whip had come down on her back. The eunuch then asked her if she wanted the palanquin to take her to her father's. She refused, expressing a desire to go on foot with her three slaves. She intended to take only her jewels and her most precious effects.

They made three parcels of them. Mirmah recounted the history of each garment that fell into her hands :

" This turban was the one you wore on your wedding day. . . . Now he is sending you back, you, the purest of doves ! Oh, woe ! He might at least give you back your virginity ! "



Although she had witnessed it, Mirmah no longer believed in Nour al-Ein's adultery. Her mistress was innocent, for she had to be innocent to escape punishment. She repeated it in every form :

"He says you deceived him . . . you who drank my milk ! You, the white jasmine."

At last they left the harem, descended the stairs, tragic in their black *mellaias*. At their approach Sheik al-Zaki's slaves hid themselves. The four women slowly crossed the court in a compact body, as though to support each other. Khalil the porter had remained at his post. Busy mending his babouche he did not interrupt his labour, did not raise his eyes when they passed in front of him.

In the street Amina timidly proposed that they wait for Goha, who doubtless would not be long in coming out. Nour al-Ein suddenly saw herself fleeing with Goha on a fast horse that was taking them far, far away. . . . Goha would become her husband. . . . She smiled at this thought, then again it was darkness. The vision had been so swift that, fallen back into hopelessness, Nour al-Ein still smiled.

Meanwhile old Mirmah protested :

"Who is this Goha ? I don't know him. Go to your father and say to him : 'I am innocent, and my husband has repudiated me.' . . ."

Nour al-Ein at once imagined a pretence to blind Abd al-Rahman. Her slave's suggestion found an immediate echo in her mind, but it clashed with a complete physical inertia that made her prefer death to the effort demanded for salvation.

At this moment a voice resounded close by :

"Hey ! Hey ! In front of you, idiot ! Can't you walk straight ? "

A donkey loaded with two baskets came trotting on

the roadway. Behind it appeared Goha, very much occupied. The donkey took the right. Eager to try out his new whip, Goha cracked it in the air. The donkey turned to the left.

“Straight ahead of you, my dear, straight ahead!”

The group of women got into motion behind the bean-seller. The short scene they had witnessed had definitely edified them.

Each had a distinct gait, just as each had a different sense of the drama. Mirmah advanced with her habitual jerky movements, emphasised by emotion, the street and the broad delight. She clung to her idea and mumbled tirelessly. Despite the tears that ran down her wrinkled cheeks, it was clear that her obstinacy distracted her from her grief. Amina, bowed like an old woman, a parcel under her arm, stumbled at each rut, and with her free hand wiped her eyes with a corner of her dress. Beside her walked Nour al-Ein. Fate had marked her for death. This idea anchored itself in her mind and supplanted her will, controlling her. She was going to the sacrifice, head bowed, with a complete abandonment of self. As for Yasmine, she walked ahead, alone. Tall and supple, she held herself erect, well-moulded in her *mellaia*. She had put her parcel on her head. At times, but rarely, she put her hand to it to readjust its balance. After a night of reflection she had chosen her way, and her freedom of movement showed she had withdrawn from the drama.

Goha had slowed his step. He noticed Yasmine at his right. This woman's arms were of such perturbing beauty that he felt the need to caress them.

“If your package tires you, you can put it on my donkey,” he said, with shining eyes.

Yasmine did not answer. He sought a word that would better express his admiration.

"Do you want my whip?" he asked. "If you like it, take it. . . ."

He cautiously approached the impressive negress and brushed her arm.

"Allah! Allah!" he said. "They are as firm as botargo!"

Yasmine's indifference was only feigned. Having decided to give herself to prostitution, she understood that she could obtain from this man all it would please her to demand. But how encourage his advances without attracting the attention of the women who followed?

"Listen," she said, so as to be heard only by Goha. "I like you, but Nour al-Ein is behind us. . . . She must not know. . . . Follow us from afar and wait until I give you a sign."

Goha did not understand the need of this ruse, since both were willing. But people were so constituted that they made everything complex, and long ago Goha had given up trying to understand their motives. He drove his donkey to the side of the street to let the women pass.

"I must talk to him," said Amina, bending toward her mistress.

"No, no, dear. . . ."

"I must. I want to. . . ." resumed the slave, with a sudden energy that Nour al-Ein had not known in her.

She approached Goha and detained him by the arm. She could not pronounce a word, so great was her emotion. Goha tried to recognise her features under the black veil.

"Let us go farther on," said Amina.

She suggested a little-frequented alley and there led the son of Haj Mahmoud.

"You don't know who I am?" she began. "I am Amina, Nour al-Ein's servant. . . . Nour al-Ein, the sheika!"

Goha's face beamed.

"It is no laughing matter!" she continued indignantly. "Your affair is known all over town, and last night the sheik repudiated Nour al-Ein. . . . Her father is going to kill her!"

Clenching her fists, she cried with a sob:

"Nour al-Ein is going to die!"

At the entrance to the lane the three dark forms had halted. The Syrian pushed Goha roughly toward Nour al-Ein.

"Hey! Hey!" he said. "I have my donkey."

"Take your donkey," she answered, handing him the bridle.

Goha studied Nour al-Ein with more curiosity than emotion.

"You must uncover your face," said the slave to her mistress, raising her veil.

Goha did not recognise her. This woman was not a stranger to him, he had met her before. . . . But nothing in her recalled the woman of the nights on the terrace. In the bright morning, in this dirty alley, Nour al-Ein was like all other women: she walked like the others, spoke like the others. . . . She was only a poor little passer-by with sad eyes and pale lips. . . . The sheika—she was unique!

Amina, indignant at this insolent examination, exclaimed:

"It is she! We haven't changed her for you. . . . Only she has been weeping all night and now her father is going to kill her! You hear, bean-seller of misfortune! She is dying because of you!"

"Amina, let us go," begged Nour al-Ein.

Used to reproaches and abuse, Goha was listening with distracted ears, and was looking passionately at Yasmine's pretty arms. The latter prudently moved away.

"Amina, you are a fool!" interposed old Mirmah. "Let us go, let us go to Abd al-Rahman's. . . . He is a holy man and . . ."

Again she expounded her idea at length. The women moved away.

Abd al-Rahman lived in the little town of Bulak, on the banks of the Nile, in an immense and dilapidated palace. To reach it one had to cross the Khalig, the Esbekiah and vast fields planted with sugar and corn. The women were eager now to arrive and to have everything finished.

"He is following us," said the Syrian, who had just turned her head.

"Let him follow us," faltered Nour al-Ein.

"Who, he?" grumbled Mirmah. "Does he exist, he? Let us go to Abd al-Rahman's."

They had left the populous quarter and were skirting gardens in flower. Goha, holding his donkey by the bridle, was following them fifty steps in the rear. He was at grips with an enigma that he strove vainly to solve. "In the first place," he mused, "there is the negress with the pretty arms. She told me to wait; I am waiting. . . . But the other? Why did she talk to me of the sheika? She cried and cried! . . . Can I understand when people cry? Hawa, she doesn't cry, she speaks gently when she wants me to understand. . . ." His eyes glued on the dark forms, he watched for some sign from them.

Near a cornfield Nour al-Ein and her companions, exhausted, crouched in a circle. Goha halted too, at a distance. A light breeze lifted his white caftan. His elbows resting on his donkey's neck, he was wondering what he ought to do, waiting for an encouraging look. He took a step forward, then another. Aloud, so as to be heard, he said:



“ By Allah ! I am undecided ! ”

Amina held out her fist to the disturber. She was greatly excited. One might have said that she, so gentle, had inherited since Nour al-Ein's collapse all the irritability that had been hers before.

“ What do you want ? ” she cried. “ You are following us with your stupidity and your wickedness ! Go away ! ”

“ We don't know you,” added old Mirmah. “ We are going to Abd al-Rahman's. . . . ”

As he did not move, they rose and resumed their way. They entered Bulak, following the bank of the Nile. Two men were unloading pottery from a little moored *dahabeah*.

“ We are arriving,” faltered Amina.

Nour al-Ein clung to her shoulder to keep from falling. One could see a high grey wall two hundred steps away. Nour al-Ein put her hand over her eyes so as not to see. Amina gave cries of distress. The gate of the estate opened and two men, the porter and the eunuch, came running toward the women. They did not answer the questions put to them and crossed the gate, striking their heads.

Goha still followed, more and more puzzled. The gate had not been closed. The women, the porter and the eunuch made for the dilapidated palace rising in the centre of the vast estate. Once white, it had long ago been covered by the *khamshins* with a layer of dust. The windows were shut. One might have thought it an abandoned sepulchre. What had once been the garden was now an arid space, despite the proximity of the stream. Alone, a banyan-tree lived among the dead vegetation.

The door of the house had opened. Yasmine, Amina, Mirmah, weeping, wailing, tearing their hair, entered. Nour al-Ein hesitated. The eunuch was supporting her,



the porter was inviting her to cross the threshold. She entered.

At this moment Goha started. As she disappeared, in a swing of her hips, a movement of her hand, in something he could not have defined, he had recognised her, and he murmured :

“ The sheika ! The sheika ! . . . ”

## XXVIII

### TRADITION

**N**OUR AL-EIN threaded long corridors paved with marble and, surrounded by her slaves, entered the room where Abd al-Rahman sat. The old man was slowly telling an amber chaplet. Nour al-Ein, detaching herself from her slaves, prostrated herself before her father. He motioned her to approach.

“I heard your women’s cries,” he said while Nour al-Ein kissed his hand.

She leaped back suddenly. As she bent over that long and bony hand a sinister thought had crossed her mind. Abd al-Rahman’s eyes were on her, but she felt he was not looking at her, that he was looking through her into the past, into the future. . . . At a sign from the old man the slaves withdrew.

“Since your husband has rejected you, my daughter,” continued Abd al-Rahman, “you will live with me.”

It was long since he had spoken so much. Indifferent to Nour al-Ein’s presence, he fell into the passive reverie that was to lead him toward death.

Nour al-Ein examined with terror the old man’s thin fingers that lingered on the beads of the chaplet. Panic-stricken, she turned toward the door to flee. She took a step and stopped, hallucinated. There was no longer any door, but only a terrible wall of stone that had closed upon her.

She threw herself against her father’s knee, screaming :  
“I am innocent ! I swear it ! I am innocent ! . . .”

Abd al-Rahman gave her a piercing look.

"Why do you talk to me of your innocence? Could it be that you are accused?"

She understood the terrible mistake she had made.

"I don't know what I am saying," she stammered. "I am in pain. . . ." And rising she added with a prodigious effort to appear calm: "Who is the idiot who closed the door?"

She took a few steps and stopped again, terrified. Then she rolled on the carpet, beating her head with her fists.

"I am innocent! I am innocent!"

She crawled to her father, stroked his feet.

"I am innocent! . . . Ask anyone you like! Ask Allah . . . If he doesn't lie to you! . . ."

But a hand had fallen on her shoulder.

"Don't blaspheme! She-dog!"

She raised to the old man her convulsed face, wet with tears and saliva and soiled with dust. A long time she sustained the keen glance of Abd al-Rahman, to look death well in the face and triumph over it. When she fell back on the carpet she was no more than a rag.

"I am guilty," she said in a voice that was almost dead. "I committed adultery. . . . By your white beard! Forgive me. . . ."

Meanwhile the old man had come out of his torpor and had risen to answer the call of his race. Honour, tradition demanded of him an effort. Transfigured, made younger, he repulsed the derelict with his foot and with resolute step left the room.

In the dreary palace a will had revived. Abd al-Rahman coldly prepared the necessary retribution, for Nour al-Ein was the fruit of his flesh and her acts the extension of his own.

At the entrance to the garden a man is lying on his stomach. He waits, motionless, his chin on his fists, his eyes dilated.

Suddenly, a savage scream resounds.

Goha says mechanically :

“ The sheika is dead.”

Noon. Insects buzz in the light. Clouds of gnats float over the ground. The muezzins sing.

The front door opens. Abd al-Rahman emerges, shoulders bowed. He crosses the garden and approaches a well. Brambles have invaded its edges. He pours a pailful of water into a silver basin. Slowly, minutely, he makes his ablutions. He washes his head and his feet. He rubs his murderous hands. When he feels himself pure enough to invoke the Lord he unfolds on the ground the liturgical rug and kneels. . . .

Abd al-Rahman was praying, forehead to the ground, for the souls of his dead who had this day been added to.



## PART FOUR: GOHA'S JOURNEY





## XXIX

### THE ACCOMPLICE

**S**HEIK AL-ZAKI learned of Nour al-Ein's death the same day and decided to follow her funeral. He crossed Cairo on foot. An old man was having his head shaved and his scalp bled ; there was a donkey with only one eye ; an effendi, blowing his nose with his fingers, had soiled his caftan ; a peddler, seated on his basket, knife in hand, was scraping the soles of his feet. . . . Never had al-Zaki looked at the street with such clear eyes. His brain registered it to the slightest detail. He saw everything and thought about nothing. A sheik was wearing a yellow caftan and green socks ; the legs of a fellah made an ellipse. Pictures succeeded each other, swift and definite. At times, with a word, al-Zaki marked them as they passed : "Crust . . . hair . . . ellipse. . . ."

Before the house of the dead stood a crowd. Soon there appeared the casket, surmounted by the black and perfumed tresses of the dead one. Sheik al-Zaki measured their length with a glance. The mourners advanced, agitating their dark veils, their faces soiled with brilliant paints. "Fourteen . . ." counted Sheik al-Zaki, and he answered courteously the greetings of the onlookers. He bowed before Abd al-Rahman, pronounced the conventional formula and, noticing a wart on the old man's face, thought, "Round. . . ." Beside him farmers were discussing the crops of Menufia. Mechanically, he gave them figures.

After the ceremony he hastened home. He spent the night seated at the window of his room, and went to

sleep a few hours before dawn. When he awoke, tired, sombre of mood, he went to his library.

For the first time since the tragedy he tried to turn his thoughts on himself.

"How much time lost!" he said aloud.

His union with Nour al-Ein had scarcely lasted thirteen months, but, in this hour of reaction, it was not only this short period that he judged; it was a long series of years, beginning far back, in his childhood.

"Now, it is all to mend," he added.

These words, that in reality meant nothing, flattered his mood and calmed him. He paced the room, staring at things with his keen eyes, buried under their bushy black eyebrows, and in his spirit clashed fragments of thoughts. Before a vase he exclaimed: "The aim of life . . ."; before a stand inlaid with mother-of-pearl: "To be indispensable. . . ." He questioned a fine Persian embroidery: "Have I a place in life? . . ." Having shrugged his shoulders he made the round of the room three times, hands crossed behind his back, shuffling. Tired, he crouched on a mat.

"I was wrong before. The propaganda I had undertaken had to end in a schism. Sufism, in sum, is no more than an impious doctrine. God alone is His own witness."

Although said in an energetic voice, this banal sentence made him yawn. He tried to rouse himself.

"I will humble my rebellious thoughts. . . . I will go to Mecca and confess my pride. The past, tradition, race, these are the most powerful, the wisest elements of my being, and from now on I will believe and act as would have acted and believed the most obscure of my forefathers."

He had spoken these last words with emphasis, forefinger rigid toward the floor. But no matter how he

feigned enthusiasm, he could not succeed in deceiving himself. Eyes lowered, conscious of the stupidity of what he was about to say, he repeated :

“ How many years lost ! ”

He took the *Fields of Gold* from the shelf and sat on a divan. As he turned the pages boredom overtook him. He murmured :

“ This book is admirable.”

He placed it on the ebony stand and propped himself among the cushions.

“ If Mohammed Riffa is not sincere, his soul is very hypocritical,” he said coldly, not realising that he thus affirmed the obvious.

Ten days before he had learned from the *wakil* on his lands in Menufia that the stream crossing his property had been diverted about the middle of the domain by the people of Mohammed Riffa. The neighbouring land had a depression, all the water was drained into it, and a part of his own land was threatened with drouth. Sheik al-Zaki had gone to complain to Mohammed Riffa of this infringement of his rights. The latter had declared he had long expected to see the stream enter his property, for already the year before he had noticed a tendency to change its course. “ I am deeply chagrined,” he had added, “ that the event favours me at your expense. What comforts me is that in this affair I see only the fulfilment of destiny.” He had concluded : “ I love you so much, however, illustrious master, that if the accident injures you, I will sacrifice my advantage for you. I will raise a strong dyke on my grounds and the stream will be returned to you.”

Al-Zaki's face purpled at the memory of so much hypocrisy, and he decided to hale his dishonest competitor before the Cadi. But first he had to make a trip to inspect the grounds in dispute.

"I'll go and make sure," he muttered. "Mohammed Riffa is a thief!"

The prospect of a two days' journey and a debate before the Cadi made him hesitate, however. "The horse tires me," he thought. "And then, my *wakil* is not very intelligent, Riffa may be right. . . ." Even more than the invasion he resented in his neighbour the fact that he was not evidently in the right, and that he was causing him a preoccupation that in the bottom of his heart he considered useless.

He was interrupted at this point in his reflections by a woman's voice. It was Mabrouka, who was entering the library. He looked up wearily at her and was disagreeably surprised by her corpulence and red cheeks.

"Who told you to come?" he asked.

Mabrouka, sure she was discharging a sacred duty, installed herself on the divan, slowly drew from a deep pocket a tobacco-box and placed it on her knees.

"I am not ungrateful," she said at last.

Since leaving her husband, Mabrouka had lived with four women servants and a eunuch in a cottage surrounded by a little garden that al-Zaki had rented at Warda's advice in the neighbourhood of the mosque of Daher. She had demanded on moving in that the outside walls be painted the same red as the palace from which the caprice of Nour al-Ein had driven her. Inside she had succeeded in having the decorations of the reception-room renewed and a broken marble flagstone replaced by a new one. In her isolation she had come so close to her slaves that all five lived the same life, spending their days playing cards, jacks, eating lupins, drinking syrups and telling each other licentious stories. Al-Zaki visited Mabrouka once a week. The old eunuch, who the rest of the time did nothing but sleep in the courtyard, came to announce his master. Mabrouka, adorned to receive him,

would advance to meet him and then, but only then, could she be distinguished from her servants.

Resigned to her solitude she was forgotten by everyone. Two days after the death of Nour al-Ein, Warda the dallala had brought her the news. "Eh, yes!" she said. "I always said luck would turn your way. Your star is good because you are loyal." As Mabrouka expressed pity for Nour al-Ein the dallala became indignant. "You are sorry for her? All your misfortune came from her. She is dead now, Allah forgive her! but, between us, she was a hussy who was bound to end badly." The dallala, eminently practical, had ended with: "Let us not lose any time. Your husband, poor man, is alone. Your place is at his side. . . . Dress, take your slaves, close up this house of misfortune and go home." Two hours later Mabrouka had entered the library, convinced by the dallala that she was indispensable to Sheik al-Zaki.

"I am not ungrateful," she repeated.

He shrugged his shoulders. In order to shorten an interview that annoyed him, he decided to listen to his wife without interrupting.

"O master! O my child!" she said. "God is my witness that I am not ungrateful. I lived far from you so your days might pass in happiness with Nour al-Ein. But I learn that you are alone. Can I remain quiet now? Can I?"

Receiving no answer, she sighed deeply and, striking her breast:

"No, I cannot be quiet," she continued. "You need a woman to take care of your home. God has deprived you of Nour al-Ein; I have come to take her place."

The name of Nour al-Ein returned unceasingly to Mabrouka's lips. Al-Zaki had thought that at the memory of the young woman he could only answer with disgust and anger. And now tears troubled his sight.



"What? What is it?"

Mabrouka had fixed on him her great black eyes.

"You shouted?" he answered.

She gave an amazing laugh, a gracious and singing laugh like Nour al-Ein's.

"Shout? I scarcely coughed."

Al-Zaki had risen. His forehead pressed against the glass of his window, he saw the image of a bark tossed at the mercy of the waves. "I am like that bark," he thought, "like that bark. . . ." And his thought went no further. The chill of the pane penetrated his burning forehead. In the courtyard of his house he saw a man trying to enter, while another pushed him toward the gate. The man who wanted to enter was Goha; the other was the porter.

Mabrouka sipped a cup of coffee a slave had prepared.

"Sheik," she said, "where do you buy this coffee? It is not as good as the coffee Sayed Ahmed sold us."

"Sayed Ahmed is a thief. He tried to make me pay twice for the same bag of coffee," answered al-Zaki, surprised to find himself giving an explanation.

"I'll arrange that," said Mabrouka. "Sayed Ahmed's coffee was better. If his coffee . . ."

Suddenly exasperated al-Zaki interrupted:

"What do you want? Tell me what you came for."

His voice was unpleasant. Not allowing herself to be taken aback by so much hostility, Mabrouka put down her cup.

"You are right," she said in a tone of wounded dignity. "I am a bad wife. I loved you, I gave you children, I guarded your possessions as my very eyes, but I am a bad wife."

The sheik shrugged his shoulders, sighed and moved nervously to the window. He saw Goha still quarrelling with the porter. "Why doesn't that idiot of a porter let

him come up ? ” he scolded. He opened the window, leaned out and sharply ordered Khalil to let the visitor in. Mabrouka rose at once, protesting.

“ You’ve told a man to come up and me here. . . . Besides, you ought not to receive the son of Haj Mahmoud. Khalil is right and you—you are wrong.

“ I receive whomever I like,” he said. “ And also, here are my conditions : you want to live in my house, and I grant you that ; but the day you try to see me, to speak to me, to advise me, that very day, if you don’t leave the house it will be I who will leave.”

Mabrouka bumped into Goha at the door and fled precipitately. Goha had never been so thoroughly angry. He begged his host to punish Khalil for his impertinence and the sheik endeavoured to calm him.

“ Khalil is a brute ! ” shouted Goha.

“ You are right, he is a brute,” answered al-Zaki.

“ He must be told, sheik.”

“ I will tell him, my child.”

Seeing his young friend enter, Sheik al-Zaki had remembered a detail that struck him for the first time. The day before, at the funeral of Nour al-Ein, he had noticed Goha a little in the rear of the procession. Each time he approached the onlookers pushed him roughly away. Al-Zaki saw their action again clearly and, connecting this public show of ill-will with Khalil’s peculiar attitude and Mabrouka’s hint, he was stupefied at the discovery of an awful truth.

Goha looked at him with joyous face, for he had good news to announce.

“ Nassim, my father’s wife, is brought to bed this morning,” he said. “ She has a boy. That makes two boys and myself. . . .”

“ So it’s he . . . ” thought al-Zaki and, seized with the fury of the male, he wanted to smash his skull. On

Goha's body he saw a score of spots where his fist should strike, and he lived the frenzy of an imaginary battle. He was surprised to find himself in the same palace, in the centre of the room, and to see Goha's smiling face intact. The latter, having vainly awaited the sheik's compliments, was thinking of Nassim's emotions and the pride of Mahmoud, who had exclaimed : " Allah has not forgotten me, and yet who am I ? " In the kitchen the women were preparing cakes and preserves ; beggars were gathering before the door, watching for Mahmoud to come out. Goha, transported by the vista of a future of festivities, did not notice the philosopher's agitation.

" He or another . . ." thought al-Zaki. He repeated these words several times to convince himself ; but now that he held the accomplice, the tragedy imposed itself on his mind in a more intimate form. He had driven Nour al-Ein out, in the name of tradition. It had been an impersonal act, without passion, and, freed of the guilty one, he had thought in good faith that he would forget. Now his instincts bound him to the drama from which, until then, he had kept aloof. " Oh, to beat him, to choke him ! " he murmured, and he felt the need of vengeance, the need to give and receive blows, to come to grips with his rival like a fellah on a street corner. To bruise this man and then to throw him out with a kick full in the rear : it was at this price alone that he would find again the peace of his soul.

His fist came down on Goha's shoulder, as though following the course of a blow already given. Under this unexpected shock Goha lost his balance and fell with his legs in the air. He did not fight back, contenting himself with moaning feebly :

" Sheik ! Sheik ! "

Al-Zaki expected a fight. Meeting no resistance he drew back. With the fall of his adversary his anger had

fallen. Goha did not move. Guided by a sure instinct he feared another assault. They remained thus, one standing, the other with his legs in the air. Suddenly the comedy of the situation struck Sheik al-Zaki.

"Get up ! Get up !" he cried, helping Goha to sit up with a movement all the more hurried because he heard the steps of a slave on the stairs.

Ibrahim presented himself with a tray in his hand and offered them coffee.

"Help yourself ! Help yourself !" said al-Zaki impatiently.

Goha hastened to help himself, thinking to calm al-Zaki, whom he watched with a timid eye. He did not dare drink more than half the cup and returned it to Ibrahim, mumbling two or three unintelligible sounds. The conventional amenities stuck in his throat. Ibrahim was about to go out when al-Zaki called him back to ask if Mabrouka had received her baggage.

"She brought it with her, Sidi."

The two men found themselves alone again, face to face. A horde of images haunted al-Zaki. He remembered the day when, returning from the funeral of Waddah Alysum, he had found Goha stretched on the divan in the library. "It was that day," he thought, and he told himself with a grimace of disgust that all people are infamous. Goha had betrayed him, Mohammed Riffa cheated him, Sayed Ahmed, the coffee-seller, had robbed him. But Mabrouka was a good woman. Decidedly she had done well to return. Goha studied al-Zaki furtively. The sheik, on his side, was eager to come to plain terms. Nevertheless he approached them with great circumspection. He was ashamed of his violence and sought by a haughty gravity to efface the impression of it from Goha's mind.

"I am very angry," he began.

"Yes, you are angry with me," Goha agreed, dropping his head.

He felt himself at fault, he felt it with such a conviction that he almost guessed what the fault was.

"I know your infamy," continued the master. "Do not ask me to forgive you, for God alone is the judge. Just answer the questions I am going to put to you and I will let you go."

Goha, raising his dilated eyes, met the hard eyes of al-Zaki. A shudder shook him. The master's words were no longer enigmas to him. He even anticipated his questions, and was terrified by them. He stammered, "Leave me alone," and, putting his hands to his breast, broke into sobs. For al-Zaki it was a relief; the sight of this outburst of emotion gave him assurance.

"You met her often?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, often," answered Goha without hesitation.

"Where did you meet her?"

"On the terrace."

"What terrace?"

"I went up to the terrace of our house and then I passed over the balustrade."

"You passed over to the terrace of my house, then?"

"Yes, yes . . ." Goha murmured, realising this for the first time.

"At night or in the daytime?"

"At night."

Goha had answered mechanically to all these questions. Each of them met a memory in the limbo of his brain. It was, so to speak, an instinctive act of memory. A complex question, by forcing him to reflect, would have halted this automatic exchange. Nevertheless he wept, because he was afraid. Of what? He could not have said, but he felt that from the depths of his soul were being taken precious things he would have liked to guard.



Engrossed by these revelations, al-Zaki had not noticed the idiot's extraordinary lucidity. The details he had exacted made the memory of Nour al-Ein atrociously cruel. Nevertheless he felt a sort of pity mingled with disgust at the sight of this face congested with tears, whose eyes were dejected, stupefied.

"I do not wish to see you again," he said, without approaching Goha. "If you were to return, Khalil would not let you come up."

Goha's mind was suddenly invaded by images of supreme humiliation. He visualised prostrations he feverishly wished to make; he heard desperate inward prayers he suffered not to be able to say; he felt a frantic need of trembling, of being servile, of crying, "Forgive! Forgive! Forgive for what I know and for what I don't know. . . . Forgive! If only you will keep me. . . ." And all these movements, all these passionate invocations summed themselves up in these timidly murmured words:

"Khalil is a brute."

A gleam of irony passed over the keen eyes of al-Zaki. With intentional hardness, calmly, he answered:

"No, don't be mistaken. Khalil is not a brute, he is a servant whom I like. . . . Now, may your evening be blessed."

He drew Goha toward the door, made him cross the antechamber as far as the stairway. Stupefied to have begged so much, offered so much of himself in vain, Goha descended the steps unwillingly. He looked furtively at al-Zaki, expecting a sign to throw himself into his arms. When al-Zaki heard the door close on him he went rapidly to his library. At the door he changed his mind, retraced his steps, reached the harem and entered Mabrouka's room. Squatting on a rug and surrounded by her slaves she was playing cards.



“ You’ve put yourself in order ? ” he asked absent-mindedly.

Without waiting for an answer he left the room and went to lean on his elbow on the balcony that overlooked the garden. The two gardeners were busy binding rose-bushes to their supports. He wanted to speak to them, but found nothing to say. “ At night, on the terrace . . . ” he thought. “ Then she did not fear I might enter her room ? ”

A few days later Mabrouka, with her husband’s consent, took possession of the part of the harem Nour al-Ein had occupied, and Sheik al-Zaki, constantly putting off the journey that would have closed the affair of the diverted stream, spent all his time with her.

## XXX

### THE STRANGER

FOR some time Hawa had been complaining of a devil. One morning she rushed into the room of Zeinab, who was nursing her new-born child. "No, madam! I can't wait any longer," she exclaimed. "The devil won't wait any longer! If I don't go to the *zar* this morning I'll smash the furniture, I'll burn down the house!"

Gathering by twenties and thirties the negresses of Cairo were accustomed to having themselves exorcised by witches to the sound of a drum. After which, discharged of their demons, they returned to their masters calm, obedient and gentle.

Hawa told herself one night that the *zar* that chases demons might equally well overcome the misfortune Goha had brought down upon her. Frequently she could be heard exclaiming: "The devil is turning! The devil is turning over! I have to go to the *zar*." Her mistresses, worried, strongly urged her to go. And so Zeinab, seeing her enter the room with feverish eyes and twisted mouth did not fail to tell her:

"Certainly, Hawa. . . . You must go, Hawa. . . . You've waited too long!"

The negress nodded her head and, with her left hand, threatened some vague thing as she murmured:

"I'll go. . . . And why shouldn't I go? . . . Certainly I'll go. . . ."

Suddenly she gave a shriek and clung to the door to keep herself from falling. A short silence followed.

Then, as if from afar, there was heard a new voice in the house of Riaz.

At Zeinab's cries Haj Mahmoud, his wives, his daughters and Goha ran up. Mahmoud looked, reflected for a moment, then said :

“ That was the devil ! ”

“ Yes, that was the devil,” answered Goha, laughing, happy to have understood his father.

Haj Mahmoud showed neither disgust nor anger. He looked at his son, he looked at Hawa and the new-born, showed an expression of satisfaction and left the room. The women augured from it that the event was pleasing to him and, fortified by this tacit approval, lavished attentions on Hawa. Hawa thought she had entered the most wonderful period of her life.

At noon Mahmoud, still in good humour, came for news of his slave. She was in the best of health. She had returned to work, trotted through the house and prepared infusions of herbs for Zeinab to combat the emotion she had caused her.

“ That's fine ! That's fine ! ” said Mahmoud, and he asked his family to leave him alone with Goha and Hawa.

Hawa took her place near the door, standing with bowed head in an attitude of extreme humility. Goha approached his father, who courteously made him sit beside him.

“ Yes, I have something to say to you,” Mahmoud began, with a smile that troubled Goha for no reason. “ Or rather, I want to consult you on some problems I have set myself. . . . First of all, tell me what is a son. You must have an opinion on this subject.”

The interview appeared under so cordial a guise that Goha blushed.

“ Since you have not been able to explain to me what a son is,” continued Mahmoud, smiling, “ I am going

to tell you. Listen well: it is he who resembles his father."

Goha on the divan and Hawa in her corner nodded in wonder.

"I do not pretend," explained Mahmoud, "that he resembles him in all points . . . no. But he resembles him in some way. Either he has the same face, or the same intelligence, or the same religion."

"That is true," whispered Hawa, who was assuming a more and more submissive expression.

"But, between us," continued Mahmoud, addressing Goha, "there is not, I think, any resemblance. Is your face like mine?"

"No," said Goha, feeling he was thus pleasing his father.

"No, is it not so? You are perhaps more handsome, but resemblance there is none. That is also my opinion. . . . Now, is your brain like mine?"

"No," answered Goha quickly.

"And have we the same religion?"

Not knowing what answer his father expected of him, Goha, embarrassed, lowered his eyes and began to stroke the woollen girdle that went three times round his waist.

"Speak without fear."

"We have the same religion."

"Allow me to contradict you," answered Mahmoud, placing a friendly hand on his knee.

It was the first time he had treated his son like a man, like a visitor to whom consideration is due, and Goha was worried by these unaccustomed manners.

"You are mistaken, my dear," continued Mahmoud. "You are not a Moslem. Do you say your prayers four times a day? Do you know how to read the Koran? If you could read the Koran, would you not have known

what the Prophet has said : ‘ Approach neither your mother nor your nurse ’ ? ”

Goha was overwhelmed by his father’s logic.

Mahmoud continued slowly, counting on his fingers :

“ Since you differ from me in your face, in your brain, in your religion, how can we consider you my son ? In all conscience, Goha, I think some mistake has been made. . . . You are not my son.”

Goha would have liked to throw himself on his father’s neck, to swear to him that he was mistaken. He raised his eyes to Mahmoud and saw with terror that he was calm and that he was smiling gently.

“ A son,” pursued Mahmoud, “ thinks in every circumstance of pleasing his father and of doing him honour. Was it with this double intention that you revealed yourself incapable of every trade I gave you ? Was it with this double intention that you brought shame on the house of my friend Sheik al-Zaki ? Was it with this intention that you approached your nurse ? ”

In her corner the negress sighed profoundly.

“ So I am right in affirming that you are not my son. In brief, you are only a stranger in my house . . . a stranger without scruples. When all I have done for this stranger is known, people will exclaim : ‘ Truly, Haj Mahmoud has done his duty, and he has been returned evil for good.’ ”

Goha hid his face. Sobs shook his body. It seemed to him that his life had become complicated with so many obstacles that he could no longer either take a step forward or a step backward.

“ Why are you crying ? ” continued Mahmoud. “ Your fortune is before you, my friend. . . . To each his destiny ! Go your way, I’ll go mine. You are a man to-day, you have a daughter. . . . With good will, you

will earn your bread. I do not keep you any longer, but what am I beside Allah who himself protects you? Take Hawa with you, I give her to you. . . . Take your daughter, she is yours. . . . I invoke upon you the goodwill of the Almighty; but never return to my house."



## XXXI

### SAYED THE ORANGE-SELLER

**H**AWA had begged Mahmoud, had dragged herself at his feet, had covered his hands with tears and kisses. She had cried in despair: "No, my Lord, do not say Goha is not your son! Forgive him and forgive your she-dog!" Mahmoud had been inflexible. Then Hawa had begged for Goha a little money or the donkey and the three remaining bags of beans so he might earn his living. This also Mahmoud had refused and, rising, he had pushed Hawa brutally away.

He had scarcely gone out when Hawa rose and calmly adjusted the *mandil* that had fallen to her shoulder. She said to Goha:

"Don't weep. . . . Your father refused you money and he refuses you a donkey; Allah will protect us! Dry your eyes and go and make up your bundle."

Goha made a little heap of his clothes and stood waiting for his nurse. He did not dare sit on the divan, or on the bed, or on the ebony stand. These old pieces of furniture had taken on the aspect of wise and privileged beings. They knew his disgrace and witnessed his departure with indifference, they, the true masters of this room, who would always remain. Now he was driven out, Goha had the sense of having been their guest for long years, and he felt timid before them.

Hawa had donned her sumptuous gallabiah of silk and brocade. This gallabiah, in which were represented the richest tunics of her three mistresses, the most luxurious caftans of Haj Mahmoud, Hawa considered the clearest profit of her thirty years of service.

"Fortunately, I have this gallabiah," she said to Goha as she came in.

She tied the strings of her *borgo* over her frizzy hair and both left the room. On the threshold of the house the negress stopped, gave three piercing shrieks, then dragged Goha along and crossed the court.

When they found themselves in the street Goha remembered they had left the child in the antechamber. He did not dare call it to the attention of the negress, who doubtless had mysterious reasons for acting as she did.

"My dear," said Hawa, touching his shoulder, "we will live alone together."

"And Bagba?" he asked.

"Bagba," she answered with a sigh, "Bagba will remain with Sidi Mahmoud."

In speaking of the parrot Goha hoped Hawa would think of the child. He vainly sought a more direct allusion.

"You have eaten nothing," suddenly exclaimed Hawa. "You must be hungry, my dear!"

"No, nurse," he said, "I'm all right, I'm not hungry."

The negress, incredulous, took from her pocket a piece of candied sugar, such as she was always careful to have with her.

"Here," she said, "eat that, and before the sun goes down, I swear by Allah you will have a plate of rice and mutton tripe!"

Suddenly they heard a call, and saw Kellani, Haj Mahmoud's porter, running after them, all out of breath. He held the new-born in his arms.

"I had forgotten my daughter," said Hawa quietly.

"A mother does not forget her child," answered Kellani. "You have made me run all the way from the house, and me so old! Are you not ashamed?"

"Couldn't you have kept her and brought her up? Isn't she Goha's daughter?"

"Do not disown what God has sent you," retorted the old man severely. "There is only one thing that can efface your sin, and that is to bring up the child of sin in the fear of sin."

And the old man went away.

"There!" said Hawa in an irritable voice. "They have given us the child. We will have to feed her, dress her. . . . With what? With what money? Me, I have four bracelets, and you, you have two pieces of copper in your pocket. . . . If your father had given you the donkey you could have loaded it and . . . By the grace of God! now what do you plan to do?"

"If you like, I will be a fez ironer," said Goha, who retained a pleasant memory of this trade.

The negress made a movement of impatience, but it was not Goha's answer that irritated her; it was her own hesitation to impart to him a weighty resolution she had made.

"You don't want that?" asked Goha.

"It is not I who don't want it, it is God. It takes a great deal of money to set up as a fez ironer."

"As you like, Hawa."

"Then listen. . . . What we have to do, Goha, is to leave fate to work itself out. . . . Allah knows what is good, we don't. . . . What seems evil to us may precisely be good. . . ."

"You are right," said Goha.

"Me," exclaimed Hawa, encouraged by this approval, "I close my eyes and I go where destiny leads me. . . . You understand, Goha? I don't know where I am going . . . but I am going . . . then we will see. . . ."

"We will see," repeated Goha.

"Which of us," continued the negress, in a vibrant

voice, "which of us can say he is free? You, you are walking with me; me, I am walking with you . . . and neither the one nor the other of us knows what we are going to do!"

While speaking she had taken, on the right, a street Goha remembered having followed in company with his donkey. On the doorsteps were women with unveiled faces. In the presence of Hawa, Goha felt ashamed to look at them. More than once he wanted to ask his nurse why she was going there, but his bashfulness restrained him, and he repeated to himself that it was destiny that led them. Hawa questioned a beggar, then, turning to Goha said:

"We have gone past the place."

They retraced their steps.

"My son," asked Hawa of a child who was passing, "is it there that Sidi Ahmed ibn Ahmed lives?"

"Under the doorway in front of you."

The negress told Goha to wait for her. When she returned an hour later Goha was fast asleep.

"He refuses," she exclaimed, waving her arms, "Sidi Ahmed refuses to rent me a room!"

Her eyes opened wide.

"Ah! you are sleeping!" she cried, giving full rein to her anger. "Ah! you want me to be the only one to break my neck! Ah! you are making fun of me! And in the first place, since you are sleeping, I will go to sleep too."

Putting into effect what she thought was a revenge, she dropped down near Goha. Suddenly, through her doze, she heard the burst of a powerful voice she knew.

"Hey there! Chief of idiots, do I have to cut your head off to wake you up?"

It was Sayed, the orange-seller. Behind him girls

were crowding. Sayed bent over Goha and spat violently in his face. Goha gave a start.

"Hey ! Hey ! Look out !" he cried.

He wiped his chin with the sleeve of his caftan and in a soft voice continued :

"May your day be blessed, Sayed !"

The orange-seller did not answer. He passed for the wittiest peddler in Cairo, and this reputation imposed upon him heavy demands. While seeking a savoury retort he stroked with his enormous thumb the black moustache that streaked his face. Hawa considered with growing apprehension the prominent bones of his face, the muscles of his legs and, above all, the thumb of which he was so proud. Never had any man exuded such strength and health in Hawa's eyes. Encouraged by Hawa's look, the orange-seller gave resounding slaps to Goha's cheeks.

"For you !" he cried. "For your mother ! For your father ! For your aunt ! And cousins ? Have you any cousins ? How many ? Five ? Five slaps for your cousins !"

Goha was howling, the girls were giggling and Hawa, shaken with convulsive gaiety, was holding her sides. She calmed herself all at once and, rising, came and brushed Sayed's arm.

"I want a word with you," she murmured.

She sighed and demurely lowered her eyes.

"Perhaps two words. . . . And in the first place, listen. . . ."

She took a few steps. Sayed, interested, released Goha and followed her.

"Sidi Ahmed won't rent me a room," she said.

"So you want to go into the business ?"

"Let me talk. . . . And in the first place . . ."

She did not dare to continue, and covered her face

with the bottom of her *mellaia*. To this avowal Sayed answered by pinching her vigorously.

“Ai ! Ai ! you will kill me,” she exclaimed.

“I’ll talk to Sidi Ahmed ; I’ll arrange everything.”

“And the room must be beautiful,” Hawa insisted.

“Just leave it to me,” answered the orange-seller.

“You shall be installed within an hour. . . . But what will you give me ? ”

“Ah, why do you ask me what I will give you when you know very well what I will give you ? . . .”

At these words the orange-seller put his arm around the negress and led her into a near-by alley.

Goha had remained with the girls. They had surrounded him in a noisy ring and each was questioning him : “So you are going to stay with us ?—It’s true you will live in the quarter ?—You will tell us your adventures, Goha ?—You will tell us about your sheika and your rose-water woman. . . .” Goha, made gay, embraced one, caressed another ; but when he saw Hawa disappear on Sayed’s arm his face darkened and he went to sit apart.



## XXXII

### IN THE QUARTER

THE room Hawa had obtained was on the ground floor of a house reserved for Syrians and situated in the principal street of the quarter. It took all Sayed's authority to obtain this breach of the immemorial rules. In vain did Sidi Ahmed point out that the negresses were separate from the Circassians and the Syrians, and that to mix them would bring disorder. The orange-seller threatened the landlord with underhanded warfare and made good his cause, for, despite his humble condition, his influence was great. At the moment of moving in Hawa had to defend herself against her neighbours, indignant at this intrusion. Sidi Ahmed received their complaints.

"A negress among us—why, it's shameful!" exclaimed the matron they had delegated. "She will spoil our business, Sidi. The presence of a negress will lower us with our clients, and we want to maintain our price."

Sayed intervened.

"You are mules," he said. "Hawa's price will be double yours. Yes, double, and I know what I am saying."

Although the negress's pretensions seemed to them both damaging and comical, the girls ceased protesting. They waited to see their rival at work. A Syrian who wore six rows of sequins over her shoulders summarised the general impression:

"One week, and—I swear it on my head!—that she-dog of a negress will be given the door with her bundle, her idiot and her child."

“And it will be no more than justice,” added her companions.

One girl alone held herself apart and seemed not to be interested in the conversation. Her eyelids, her cheeks and her lips were swollen. A light dress clung to her form, outlining the precise curve of her legs and the slope of her shoulders. Seated on a rug she rocked her body mechanically. The Syrian planted herself before her in an aggressive pose and scolded her :

“Has anyone ever seen a girl weep like you for her virtue? You wept coming in; you howled with your first client until it was a scandal! And since then you weep, weep, weep! My word, one would say there was something extraordinary about your virginity! A negress and a sniffer. . . . Send us a leper woman and we’ll be all complete. . . .”

She stopped on this ironic reflection, then, seized with a sudden burst of rage :

“And I, I know only one thing,” she cried, “and that is, that our good name is lost!”

“You are right,” sobbed the young woman, “I have a sorrow. But soon you’ll see how gay I am.”

“First, what is your name?” asked the Syrian, softening. “We have nicknamed you ‘The Sniffer.’”

“My name is Amina,” answered the prostitute.

Incapable of concentrating their attention on one subject for long, the girls who had gathered on the step of the house, in which most of them lived, separated. Amina went up to her room. A few sat on the doorstep to watch for passers-by. Backs to the wall, bare feet in the mud, they cried their prices in turn, with monotonous voices. When a man stopped they listed with precise details the tariff of their amorous practices; if he hesitated they sought to increase his desire by obscene words and gestures. Sometimes the stranger approached,

attentively studied the merchandise offered him, handled her, encouraged by pantomime and groans. He made his choice or went away. In any case it was a concert of abuse and curses and he had to struggle against the angry hands clinging to his caftan.

Night was falling rapidly. The motionless flames of lanterns shone in windows without lighting the street. In the smoking-houses exclamations and laughter preluded the silence and the long quiescences of the hashish-eaters. Blind or crippled beggars were making for places of rest with careful steps, drawing aside at the passage of loud-mouthed men, young and old. At times noisy groups crowded into smokers or dance-halls. Before their doors freshly painted girls quarrelled feverishly among themselves over the slightest trifle. A strong odour of rotting vegetables and urine mingled with the scent of the breeze, making the atmosphere enervating. The girls, with smiles and curses on their lips, breathed freely of the powerful breath of the night and, as though the better to saturate themselves with it, raised their dresses to the waist.

Two men were making for the house where lived Hawa and Amina. Circassian women who were on the watch threw themselves at them, but suddenly the heavy fists of one of the visitors came down on their shoulders :

“ Make way ! Make way ! Daughters of dogs ! ”

Recognising the orange-seller, they moved back, grumbling :

“ It is Sayed with an effendi. ”

“ They are probably going to Amina’s. ”

“ A girl who sniffles from morning till night ! She is sought after because she is new, but they’ll get tired of her . . . and soon she’ll be reduced to licking our feet ! ”

Sayed and the effendi stopped for a moment on the doorstep. They were engaged in a political discussion.

"The sultan, the real sultan, the one at Stamboul, must re-establish his power," the effendi was saying, while the orange-seller was taking the part of the rebellious mamelukes.

The girls had followed them into the house. They stayed at a distance, listening, curious to know if it was with Amina that the young man would spend the night. Contrary to their expectations he disappeared behind a hanging to the left of the entrance. They looked at each other in amazement, then ran to the street before the first-storey window, just in time to catch sight of Hawa, who, her face lit up with an enormous smile, was drawing the curtains.

"You saw her head? A very frying-pan!"

"She'll be the proud one to-morrow."

"Let her try. . . . By Allah! I'll break her bones for her!"

"Don't forget Sayed is protecting her."

They went back and sat on the doorstep and noticed that a man had installed himself there in their absence. It was Goha.

"What are you doing here?" asked one of the Circassians.

Receiving no answer, she bent over Goha and shook him.

"Hey there!" he said. "Hey there!"

"What are you hiding there on your knees?" asked the prostitute.

"My daughter."

"So you are the negress's procurer?"

He did not answer.

"You are the idiot?"

"Yes."

“ Well, this isn’t your place. . . . Go away.”

Goha rose, crossed the street and sat against the wall facing Hawa’s room. Shadows appeared at times on the red curtains. Mechanically Goha would turn away his eyes. He knew the negress was prostituting herself to provide for their needs. Two days before, in a slightly anxious voice, she had made her plans known to him. “ The whole thing,” she had said, “ is to attract men and to please them.” If she managed, it was success, wealth. He had approved with a grave air, confident in his nurse’s wisdom.

Nevertheless, crouching against the wall that night, Goha did not succeed in being happy although the negress was making her debut with the visit of an effendi. With a dejected face he murmured :

“ Hawa will be happy. . . .”

It took a considerable effort to add :

“ I too, I am happy. . . .”

The curtains hanging at Hawa’s window expanded ceaselessly. They were animated with monstrous life. Goha stared fixedly at the ground. It seemed to him these curtains alone were the cause of his discomfort, and that if they were to disappear suddenly his discomfort would disappear at the same time.

In the street a noise of footsteps, exclamations and laughter. Two shadows were struggling. One man sought to flee while another held him back with a tightly clenched hand.

“ Allah cut you in pieces, you are making fun of me ! ” the one was saying.

“ I only want to please you,” the other replied.

Goha recognised Sayed’s voice. The orange-seller, muscles tensed, chest protruding, was planted firmly on both feet. At the end of his arm the effendi was gesticulating.



“Look here, Sayed. . . . you are joking!”

“Follow my advice,” retorted the orange-seller, without relaxing his grip, “and you will bless me.”

At this moment the red curtains separated and Hawa appeared at the window. She leaned out to follow the discussion.

The effendi was still parleying :

“In the name of your mother, Sayed, let us go.”

The peddler still did not answer, but his silence held something resolute, threatening, that impressed the effendi. He tried to laugh :

“Ha ! Ha ! What a good joke !”

“Follow my advice,” said Sayed in a low voice.

This time the effendi was seized with real panic. He hurriedly put a gold sequin in Sayed’s hand.

“Keep that !” said Sayed angrily. “You will stay or else——”

Without finishing his sentence he dragged his companion to the door, pushed him into the hall and, raising the heavy hanging, added :

“Good-night !”

Again the red curtains closed.

Goha had witnessed the dispute without moving. Ordinarily he took no interest in that kind of spectacle unless a word or a gesture aroused his gaiety. Then he felt the intoxication of the tumult and the need to spend himself in disordered crazy movement.

Although the scene between Sayed and the effendi offered many causes for gaiety, the thought even that one could laugh in such a circumstance would have stupefied him. His eyes glued on the two men, he felt an intense emotion. His heart beat as though it would burst. Where usually he perceived only disorder he now saw drama, and he felt himself clearly the central point of it, as though on the result of this quarrel depended



his own fate. Without his being conscious of it, his sympathy was with the effendi ; he hoped he would reduce the orange-seller to begging for mercy. Already his leg was rehearsing the kick he would give Sayed the moment he rolled in the mud, felled by his adversary. When he saw the effendi had given in he stifled a cry in his throat, and when he found himself alone again in the silent street, facing the red mystery of the curtains, his troubled state turned to terror.

He wanted to flee, but a burden lay on his knees. He was about to throw it to the ground. . . . His arms hesitated. . . . The sleeping infant had manifested her existence by a scarcely perceptible sigh. With a stupid movement Goha replaced her on his knees.

From then on he thought no more of escaping and his terror fell of itself. Tightly wrapped in her swaddling bands, her little oldish face covered with a too-large bonnet, from which protruded fleshy lips and flattened nostrils, the child slept. Goha considered her with a sad eye. His daughter was more than a mere burden, but what she was he did not know. He advanced his hand toward the tiny body, sought to feel its shape through the stiff clothes . . . and instinctively his gesture of curiosity became a caress. Now he noticed the even, tepid breath that was exhaled from the child's lips, and the light beating of her heart. He leaned toward this mystery of life while an agreeable, though painful, sensation lingered along his nerves.

He felt in a more intense degree that need to protect that he had felt one day toward his donkey. He wanted to show his affection for that little feeble thing, but he was afraid to hurt her by hugging her in his arms. He slowly undid the band of cloth rolled around his turban and with it covered his daughter's body so she should not be cold. That did not content him ; he felt he ought

to do more for her. Then he spoke to her, as he had spoken to his donkey :

“ You, you are a little Goha. . . .”

These words moved him and a tear slipped down his cheek. He repeated :

“ You, you are a little Goha. . . .”

But that was not enough. His eyes fixed on his child, he suffered not to be able to give expression to his feeling. Gathering himself in a creative effort, seeking a cry, he groped among his memories of past tenderness. And, without understanding that the memory of emotions experienced was coming forward and animating his voice, he chanted, thrilled to the heart :

“ I sell beans. . . . Who wants beans ? . . . Here are beans. . . .”

And with this chant, that emanated from the best that was in him, he thought to envelop with his whole being the child sleeping on his knees.

## XXXIII

### HAWA'S AFFAIRS

GOHA was still nursing his child when Hawa signed through the window for him to come in. He rose, but very gently, elaborating his movements with a thousand precautions, so great was his fear of waking the child.

"Hurry up!" called the negress.

In the middle of the entrance he noticed a broken tile. To avoid it he hugged the wall. At last he raised the hanging that screened Hawa's room and gave a cry of delight. The negress had thrown herself on him and had torn the baby from his arms with an exclamation:

"O my moon! My life! My light!"

She quickly uncovered the face buried under the cotton bonnet, pinched the nose, greedily kissed the folded fingers and began to dance heavily, careless of the baby's wailing:

*"La! . . . La! . . . I've two sequins!  
La! . . . La! . . . I've two sequins!  
La! . . . La! . . . I've two sequins!"*

She tossed the baby on the divan and threw herself on Goha, who was looking at her dumbfounded. She kissed his cheeks, his lips, his eyes, pulled his ears and the tuft of hair standing on the top of his head.

"Now look," she said, opening her hand, in which glinted two gold sequins.

Her face suddenly became serious.

"Look," she continued in a severe tone, "and in the

first place admire what I am showing you. . . . Two sequins, and they're gold. . . . Gold like they give the daughters of a mameluke ! ”

Suddenly she clapped her hand over Goha's nostrils.

“ Smell that ! ” she added. “ And bless the Almighty. . . . That's gold, Sidi. . . . And in the first place, to whom was it given ? To Hawa. Who earned it ? Hawa. . . . It's Hawa who earned it. . . . ”

She was silent a moment.

“ No, we must be fair,” she said. “ Hawa earned it, but Sayed is a good fellow. . . . ”

She clicked her tongue :

“ Ah ! What a man ! ”

Goha felt he ought to repeat it after his nurse as he had done before : “ Ah ! What a man ! ” But he could not. He wanted to overcome his repugnance. As he tried, his repugnance became hate for the orange-seller. In a dull voice, fists clenched, he said :

“ Sayed wanted me to show my backside. . . . ”

Hawa scowled.

“ And in the first place,” she said, “ I won't have any wrong spoken of Sayed. . . . You hear, Sidi ? ”

Goha did not answer. But this sentence, and especially the manner in which it had been said, caused him a pain such as he had never before experienced. Both kept silent.

When they went to bed the negress and Goha were reconciled, but Goha did not sleep. Eyes wide open, he wanted to think of his child, of Hawa, of Sayed ; he wanted to find the relation between these beings and himself. He had not yet the feeling that the little girl was his. It was only a little thing that was in his care. Searching his heart he found he was afraid for her, that he had nothing but fear. He thought of Sayed. This man had persecuted him, but with such a brutal frankness

that Goha had always felt a trust in him. For two days the orange-seller had been insinuating himself into his life. It was no longer as before, a kick in the back and a great burst of laughter freeing them one from the other. Now he felt Sayed constantly around him. Ah, how he would have preferred to this constant menace, to this insidious presence, a violent, an actual scene. He missed their short fights in the street, the exchange of fisticuffs, that spending of energy in broad daylight from which he returned with bruised limbs. Now his body was intact and his soul was heavy. He realised that he had always loved the orange-seller despite his violence. From now on he would be the slave of this man whose power he understood all at once. His single safeguard was Hawa. He thought of Hawa. At each of the crises he had gone through she had sustained him with her quiet smile. The negress slept, lying on her back. He prepared to awaken her, and to address to her the habitual sentence :

“Hawa, don't you want to talk a little ? ”

He did not dare to, and immediately he was appalled not to have dared.

“Hawa, Hawa,” he faltered, but in a voice so low he could not hear it himself.

He was frightened by a thing he was on the point of discovering and he shook his head as though to muddle his thoughts. He resumed his meditations. Sayed ; his child. . . . He had to defend himself against the one and protect the other. How easy the task would be if Hawa would be to him what she had been before ! Leaning on the broad shoulders of his nurse he would level every obstacle. Nothing could resist him. And he imagined glorious battles in which he would tame his enemies with a turn of the hand. He had heard a public story-teller recount the adventures of Antar. They were

the adventures of his own life. It was he who, in his childhood, had smashed the muzzle of a lion by spreading its jaws ; he who, on a day of battle, had dug with one blow of his lance-head a bottomless pit into which three thousand horsemen had sunk. And what he had done once—why could he not do it again ? If only Hawa were willing. . . . He awaited the dawn, wide-eyed, in turn exalted, calm and depressed.

In the morning Hawa rose joyously before Goha's feverish eyes.

"Get up, master, I have to clean up," she said absentmindedly.

Goha started at these words. They reminded him of the happy days when, driven by his nurse's broom, he wandered from room to room. Transported with joy he thought that former day had returned.

"You remember, nurse ? . . . One day I said : 'Hawa, I swear you've swept this room !' . . . It wasn't true."

"I have no time for fooling, Sidi," answered Hawa impatiently. "I am in a hurry. . . . Sayed has promised to bring me a client this morning."

Goha's smile died on his lips. His last hope had crumbled. He left the room, drunk with weariness and pain.

A woman was descending the stairway. It was Amina, Nour al-Ein's slave. Reaching the last step, the young Syrian gave a cry. He put his hand on her shoulder and said in a caressing voice :

"Amina. . . ."

"Go away ! Go away !" she answered hatefully. "I knew you were living in this house, but I didn't want to see you."

Goha said :

"The sheika, eh ? . . . The sheika. . . ."



Amina's breast rose. She collapsed on the stairway, sobbing. Leaning against the rail, he watched her without a word. The young slave's grief made him happy without his knowing why, and, although he continued to smile, he thought he was weeping too.

He approached her, gently put his arm around her. It was pleasant to be close to her thus, to dream of things that were vague, but that concerned them both.

"Sister," he said.

After a pause he repeated :

"Sister."

She did not answer, but she too found that fraternal embrace good.

"You remember?" continued Goha. "Her foot was small, small. . . . Her hand was small. . . . Oh! how small she was . . . and she walked like that. . . ."

Amina listened, nodding her head and pressing closer to him.

"Her dress was yellow," Goha was saying. "Her soul was grey. . . . Every day I brought her a jug of water and a melon. . . ."

Amina had taken his hand and was stroking mechanically.

"The first time," said Goha, "she wanted to throw me into the street. Her forehead was hard, hard. . . ."

He was talking low and his lips brushed her ear.

"Another time, angels were killing genii with blocks of fire. . . . She was afraid. . . . She said: 'Look! look!' And I was happy. . . ."

Their faces, wet with tears, had come closer together. But Amina blushed, lowered her eyes and drew away. Goha made an attempt to restrain her. Hawa's voice drew him from his reverie.

"Goha," she called, "don't go away. . . . I am preparing some beans for you."

"All right, nurse."

He took his chaplet and began to tell the beads. At times his nurse's voice reached him :

"I don't know what is the matter with my fire," she was saying. "It's always going out."

She sang, stopped, came and went with her heavy tread. Suddenly she screamed :

"There ! I was sure of it. . . . I have upset the beans. . . . Naturally, I have to do everything, everything. . . . Everybody gives me the evil eye for my gallabiah, for my clients. . . . Under those conditions everything is bound to go wrong. . . ."

These preparations had aroused Goha's appetite.

"Hawa," he asked, "shall we eat soon ?"

"Eat ?" she answered crossly. "Yes ! I have to think of everything. . . . No ! You will not eat."

Ten minutes later she called Goha :

"Get ready ! I am heating some more."

He rose to join her when Sayed, accompanied by an old man, appeared at the front door. Intimidated, not knowing where to flee, Goha remained standing, and he noticed his hands were in his way.

"She is there, the big duck ?" asked Sayed in an oily tone.

"Yes, Sayed. . . . Yes, the big duck," stammered Goha.

"And you, God willing, you are well ?" continued the orange-seller.

All these amenities augmented Goha's confusion.

"A rose petal !" said Sayed, affectionately touching his cheek.

Goha shuddered at the contact, and he had the certain feeling that his throat had closed, that he would never again be able to swallow anything. Trembling, he tried to answer : "God bless you, Sayed ! . . ." But the

words did not come and great drops of sweat beaded his forehead.

"Goha!" called the nurse from her room. "You will eat your beans later."

"All right, nurse, whenever you like," quickly answered Goha.

Prostitutes, seated in a wide circle at the entrance to the house, were taking their first meal. They occupied part of the roadway. At times a donkeyman called to them roughly and they answered him with abuse and teasing.

"Ah! There you are!" exclaimed the Syrian with the five rows of sequins, seeing Goha advance timidly toward the group. "And your daughter?"

"She is sleeping," said Goha.

He watched enviously the bowl of beans she was holding in her lap, and into which she had just broken two boiled eggs. The Syrian noticed his look of desire. She winked at her companions and said carelessly:

"The negress gave you nothing to eat?"

"No," answered Goha, sitting down, "she gave me nothing."

"Well! I'm a good-hearted girl," continued the Syrian. "They say you are amusing. . . . Make us laugh and I will give you some beans."

Without paying any more attention to Goha she continued her meal. Goha, whom the girls were watching furtively, was stupidly endeavouring to dig his fingers into his babouches.

"What are you waiting for?" asked the Syrian.

Goha smiled wistfully. Turning his eyes on the young woman he mused: "I've been wanting to say something to you for a long time . . . something. . . . Oh, not so you'll give me some beans. . . . What I need is

that you should be nice, as on the first day, when I arrived. . . .”

“Amusing? You?” exclaimed the Syrian. “A fine idiot you are. . . .”

“Yes! And the negress is making a great mistake hampering herself with you. . . .”

“You are right,” assented one of her companions. “A head like that brings misfortune.”

Impressed, the prostitutes drew away.

“My dear, I have something to say to you,” said the negress to Goha when he rejoined her. “It is very serious, and next time I’ll be angry. Me, I earn my living, and you, you make fun of it. When my clients pass you, you don’t embrace their shoulders, you don’t even ask them if—God grant it!—their health is good. I beg you to be polite, to interest yourself in my affairs. . . . And now take your beans.”

That evening when Sayed appeared with another client Goha rose hurriedly and, with a mechanical movement, brought his hand to his brow several times. He endeavoured to vary his greeting, to lavish himself:

“Welcome. . . . May God . . . May happiness . . . Deign to honour us . . . You illuminate the house . . . You . . . You . . .”

But the men had already gone by. Without stirring from the wall Goha continued to carry his hand to his forehead. His gesture grew more and more violent. Now he was slapping his eyes, his nose, and he did not stop until he felt his face on fire.

He looked around him, ready to sob, but his face made a grimace. He gave an unexpected laugh. He sat on the roadway, elbows on his knees and head on his hands.

“Goha,” said the negress, whose speech was gaining in assurance since her success with men—she had just counted her sequins and was not in a mood to judge

indulgently the weakness of others—"Goha, you are abusing my patience. To pretend to obey me you saluted my client after he had gone by, and you asked about his health with eyes so wicked you seemed to be wishing his ruin."

She waited for an answer with bended body, thus expressing her aloof kindness. Goha hesitated. His countenance was strangely tormented. Since his arrival in the quarter he had lost the freshness of his complexion and his youth. Now he was almost ugly.

"Nurse," he said in an ardent voice, "I can't."

"What are you telling me?"

"I can't," he repeated, placing his hand on his chest.

"What you ask me is impossible . . . impossible. . . . I cannot. . . ."

The negress could not see the passionately profound humanity of this avowal. She smiled scornfully and answered in a solemn tone:

"I see, Sidi, that you have not changed. . . . Ah! Haj Mahmoud was right. . . . Well, Allah's will is inscrutable. . . . I have only one word for you: obey me and you will be all right . . . don't obey me, and then . . . then . . ."

She was unable to maintain this contemptuous attitude, that she considered alone worthy of her new condition. Giving free rein to her nature she exclaimed:

"And then—that will be enough! . . . I am sorry for you, but there is a limit to everything. . . . You will salute my clients properly or I'll crush you like a fly. Do you hear, idiot?—like a fly, and Sayed will have charge of the job!"

She gave a short laugh.

"Ha! Ha! Sayed will swing you like a leaf. He's strong, that man! . . . You, you're nothing. You are not even handsome any more."

"Nurse," roared Goha in a mad rage, his eyes blood-shot, "I spit on Sayed!"

"Goha," cried the negress, brandishing her arm, "Goha, I shall be angry! . . ."

"I spit on Sayed!" roared Goha, a ferocious gaiety flooding his face. "Yes, and I kill him!"

But the negress had calmed herself suddenly. She shrugged her shoulders, hummed, adjusted the *mandil* over her hair. Goha remained crestfallen. Suddenly he ran to Hawa, cowered against her and stammered:

"I can't, nurse, I can't. . . . Anything you want, but I can't do that. . . ."

And while he sobbed Hawa mused, almost in spite of herself, on the virile pride of the orange-seller.



## XXXIV

### GOHA'S CRIME

FROM that day conversation between Goha and the negress became less frequent. Some days even they exchanged no more than the customary greetings. The negress saw no more in Goha than a piece of furniture that one moves about. She had ordered her life, dividing her free hours between her housework and the care of her child. She loved, above all, to sit at the window with the baby on her knee. With half-open mouth she dreamed of a luxurious future. A clever business woman, she had ensured herself a regular clientele.

One morning she asked Goha for details about Nour al-Ein. Red with emotion at the thought of being able to do something for Hawa he could only stammer: "Her foot was small. . . . Her hand was small. . . . And she danced so. . . ."

"All right, Sidi," answered the negress sympathetically. "Now leave me, I have to think. . . . You are good for nothing. . . ."

But Goha wanted to satisfy his nurse, to give her the fruits of experience. He resumed very quickly:

"Her forehead was hard. . . . Her dress was yellow. . . ."

Hawa raised her head.

"Yellow?"

"Yellow."

She bought herself a yellow dress. But Goha's expectation was not realised. There was no familiarity between him and his nurse.

He was afraid of her, fearful of annoying her, of calling rebukes upon himself. He followed her constantly with his eyes, to anticipate her wishes, to obey her commands as soon as they were given. The negress rarely made use of him. Then he got in her way ; he would remove a speck of dust from her, a hair stuck to her dress. The negress let him do so, without saying anything. Once when he was at it he upset a stand and smashed a water pitcher.

The only happy minutes Goha lived in those long weeks were those when from afar he followed with his eyes the form of Amina, going and coming in the street, descending the stairs and climbing them again. The Syrian seldom left her room. At regular hours she did her shopping. Goha saw her return, carrying in her lifted skirt onions, bread, tomatoes, mandarin oranges, melons. Later she would appear with two little pitchers which she filled at the fountain in the courtyard of the house. She, at least, was a friend. Goha knew it. Nevertheless, since the far-off meeting at which they had evoked the sheika, they had never again spoken to each other.

With gloomy obstinacy Goha sought for an affection, a support, or even the sound of a voice to take his thoughts away from himself. Often he approached the prostitutes, sat a few steps from them, as near as possible, never daring, however, to mingle freely with their group. If they pretended not to see him he became sad ; if they looked at him he was abashed. These girls, who at first had greeted him with effusive joy, now treated him with contempt. Knowing of him from the legends, they had expected to find him an amusing fool, almost a buffoon. His fine appearance had strengthened this belief. But their illusion was soon dissipated. The company of the new-comer seemed boresome to them

from the day after his arrival, and soon, when he had lost his good humour, his freshness, his health, they perceived that, far from being amusing, his foolishness was dreary.

Two or three times they showed themselves cruel toward him. They chased him from their presence or tore off his turban, throwing filth in his face. They had a repugnance for him, a physical hate born of their disappointment, but which had been greatly strengthened the day one of the prostitutes had said at random that a head like Goha's brought misfortune. The word had been approved, repeated, and it became notorious in the quarter that Goha was a bearer of misfortune. Hawa's passive complicity in saying nothing when such opinions were advanced before her gave weight to his calumny. In truth, the negress did not believe it. In affecting to give it credence she expected admiration for the greatness of soul that made her keep and nourish and protect a creature of evil.

Goha realised he was definitely lost. His look had lost its frankness, he looked at everything, even at furniture, furtively. At times, without apparent reason, his hands grew feverishly agitated in the folds of his caftan. A sort of rage against himself would possess him. He was hungry, he was thirsty, but he would not eat the beans that seemed within reach of his hand, and he would not permit himself to drink from the pitcher that stood for hours on the window-sill.

At night he waited in the street until the red curtain was drawn and Hawa beckoned him to come in. The clients passed by, one by one, always accompanied by Sayed. He fought against the sleep which weighed on his eyelids and, to occupy his mind, he gave himself to calculations.

"This one is young," he thought. "The young ones

do not remain as long as the old ones. I will soon be able to go to bed."

When the client came out Goha rose hurriedly and brought his hand to his forehead.

"May God protect you, Sidi; may God protect you. . . ."

He prepared to return to his room, but he saw Sayed, who, followed by another client, was motioning to him to wait. He resumed his calculations:

"I didn't see him. . . . Is he a young one, or an old one?"

His wait lengthened out. He dozed, awoke with a start. Dawn was whitening the houses.

At last came the day of tragedy.

It was a morning in the month of Shawal. . . . The dusty air presaged a choking heat. Goha, who had been up very late, slept heavily. He did not answer the call of the negress, who had decided to clean her room thoroughly. She called a second time, then went and shook him with both hands:

"Hey, wake up; I have to clean all over to-day. All you know is eating and sleeping. . . . That's all you know how to do. . . ."

He awoke, took in his arms the child Hawa handed him, and went to sit in the entrance, on the first step of the stairway.

The baby girl on his knees struggled against her swaddling bands. She twisted her puny body, shook her arms and legs. She succeeded at last in freeing an arm, and her fist clung to Goha's caftan.

"It is my child," he told himself; "my child."

No burst of tenderness followed this thought. He had simply a sense of property, and evil instincts were stirring within him. At this moment Sayed appeared at the door. Crossing the hall he gave a friendly tap to

Goha's shoulder, without saying anything. Goha, however, thought he heard a laugh. Jaws and fists clenched, he muttered curses. He had had enough of servility, of infamy, of the humiliations and sufferings that were imposed upon him. He wanted to bite, to bite men until he drew blood. He looked at his child and a madman's hope germinated in his brain. This girl was his own, just as he himself belonged to Mahmoud. He had every right over her, she owed him obedience and respect.

He bent over his child and, with a voice that strove to sound indifferent, said :

"Salute your father."

The little one waved her fist, laughing.

"Don't make fun of your father," scolded Goha. "I am telling you to salute me."

He waited, face grimacing, eyes dilated. Suddenly he took the baby from his knees, placed her on the ground, on the flagstones.

"I command you," he mumbled.

The child began to cry. He belaboured her with nervous blows on the cheeks and the stomach. For a moment he looked at her in suspense, thinking of what he had to do.

"Then kiss my hand!" he cried.

He pressed his hand against his daughter's open mouth, weighing more and more on the soft gums, bruising them pitilessly, absorbed in his mad idea :

"Kiss my hand!"

And as the child continued to wail and to drool on that great stiff hand which, shaking, hammered against her face, Goha, beside himself with anger, seized in his rigid hand the new-born's skull and crushed it with one violent blow against the flags.

"He's killed my child!" screamed Hawa, throwing herself on Goha, who was looking stupidly at what he

had done. "Monster! Monster! Tear out his eyes, Sayed! Tear the soul out of his body!"

Without realising how, Goha found himself in the street, where Sayed had dropped him.

"Go away," said the orange-seller gently; "go away. . . ."

"I spit on her," grumbled Goha, "I spit on you, I spit on all of you!"

"Go away," repeated Sayed with a gracious smile, pushing him by the shoulders. "If ever you need anything come and ask for it. I love you very much, Goha; I love you very much."



## XXXV

### THE FOOL'S REVOLT

**A**T Hawa's cries, people came running from all the neighbouring alleys, and soon before the house of the crime there was a noisy gathering of prostitutes, idle fellahs, and peddlers with their baskets and their beasts. Caftan flying, Goha was going away with great strides. He walked in the centre of the street, cleaving the air with both arms to ensure free way: a useless precaution, Hawa's cries having created a void before him.

The street ended in a square, bordered with little stalls. In the shadow of green, yellow, red or white awnings groups were talking. The whole place was littered with vegetables and fruits. Among the melons, the pumpkins, the egg-plants, the merchants stood yelling and gesticulating.

Goha drew his head down between his shoulders. It seemed to him that the smell and the dampness of the girls' quarter stuck to his skin like a sticky substance, and that, in the dazzling light of the sun-bathed place, he appeared all black.

A little to one side, amid the stones of a ruined building, a cobbler had installed his shop. Forty years devoted to cutting and sewing leather had not enriched him. His gallabiah, falling in tatters, did not reach below the knee.

"Welcome," he said to Goha with a kind look.

Goha did not answer the greeting; not because he was distracted, but because he wanted to humiliate the old man.

"As you will, my son. . . . You are better dressed than I, but Allah alone is great. . . ."

And the cobbler bent over the piece of leather he was cutting.

Goha looked at him fixedly. His skull was smashed. Bits of brain hung on his ear, and on his cheeks streaks of blood had coagulated. This sight aroused neither horror nor disgust in Goha. All creatures had their skulls open. You had only to look at them closely to become aware of it.

He rose. He took one street, then another. Until night he walked without stopping. He had lost the sense of time; weariness had numbed his senses. Although he had eaten nothing since the day before, and the heat was oppressive, he was insensible to the aroma of meats that escaped from roasting-houses; he was insensible to the breeze that glided over his sweating neck. He was conscious only of his legs; he was altogether in his legs; and his legs were on the march for ever.

Suddenly he stopped, so sharply that he almost lost his balance. A belated pedestrian had just appeared at the end of an alley. To see him without being seen Goha, with beating heart, flattened himself against a wall. A few steps from Goha the man disappeared through a door and closed it after him. Goha leaped forward. He considered the closed door with a gloomy eye, then with anger; and suddenly he wished misfortune on the stranger. He wanted to give the door a blow with his shoulder, to break it in, to see inside. He wanted to see inside. The idea became rooted in his mind that after having seen he could take the stranger in his hand and crush him like a ripe fruit.

He put his eye to the keyhole, holding his breath. He saw nothing. He looked for a crack. Finding none,

he lay on the ground to look under the door; he tried to slip his fingers in the opening, but in vain. He rose, breathless, and resumed his march.

Before each door he slowed his steps, thinking of what he might do to see. The blow of the shoulder, by dint of being held back, was growing in his muscles. Goha was sure that if he decided to release it, that blow of the shoulder would overturn a house. But he did not decide. Now and then he approached a wall, touched it with the tips of his fingers, pressed feebly—the wall resisted. Goha continued on his way.

“Hey! Sidi. . . . Look! . . . You’ve been lying against our door. . . .”

Goha awoke with a start and surprised an urchin who was passing over his body. He had gone to sleep while walking and had sunk down there without knowing it. The urchin bent laughing eyes on him.

“Too bad!” he said. “You’ve soiled your pretty gallabiah. . . .”

“You are an idiot,” grumbled Goha. Seeing that the child held a corn-cake he snatched it from his hand and threw it into a mud puddle.

At the urchin’s cries a woman appeared at the door of a house.

“Aren’t you ashamed?” she said. “Do people steal a child’s breakfast?”

“Who stole?” said Goha, with a surly air.

“You! You!” cried the child.

“Me? Idiot. . . . Me? I stole your cake? . . . Where is it, idiot? In my hand? Where? There it is, your cake! . . . It’s in the mud, your cake!”

“Go away, and God forgive you,” said the woman contemptuously. “You are not a man!”

“I am a man,” grumbled Goha. “Come on and you’ll see if I’m not a man.”

About noon his hunger became unbearable. Along the streets people were crouching around steaming dishes. He passed them rapidly. The odour of victuals and the noise of eating wrung cries from him.

He was before his father's house. The courtyard had taken on a festive appearance. Rugs covered the tiles, awnings adorned with arabesques shaded it, garlands and many-coloured lanterns hung from the beams. Goha shook his head. The house itself had no longer the same aspect. Never had he known it to be so imposing and so tightly closed. He found it incomprehensible that he had once been able to enter and go out at will. At the far end, in the shadow, Kellani, the old porter, was saying his prayers. Goha felt stricken to the heart and moved away.

He went and sat down a few steps away, against Sheik al-Zaki's house. He thought of his father, he thought of the being he had loved the most, Hawa, his nurse. . . . It was so long since he had seen her ! Had she aged ? Did she remember Goha, the black scarab who visited her at night ? Had she got a new gallabiah ? . . . "Wear it and use it with joy !". . . What was Hawa doing at this hour, Hawa his white jasmine ? She was filling Bagba's dish. . . . "Tozz ! Tozz ! Damn your father !" "Hey ! Bagba, why do you want my father damned ?" . . . She was knotting on the top of her head her thirty little braids. . . . No. . . . She was in the kitchen. . . . She was preparing the mutton. . . . "Goha, the fire won't go, come and blow on it. . . . Now go away, I'll call you for breakfast." . . . He goes away. . . . He waits in the street. . . . Oh, how hungry he is ! What will he eat ! Will he eat the leg o' mutton or a piece of the flank ? He will eat both, and he will eat the head too. . . .

A man was before him. He recognised the black face

and grave eyes of Khalil, Sheik al-Zaki's porter. Goha looked at him wickedly and moved away, carrying with him odours of grilled meats, of garlic and fried food. The smell of fried food was more persistent, and soon it alone was filling his nostrils.

"Hey! Hey!" said the seller of fried fish, as he shook his frying-pan, "you've changed very much! We haven't seen you for a long time!"

"May your day be blessed. . . ."

"Where do you come from? You haven't come from your father's? . . . I was talking to Kellani, your porter, the other day. . . . Haj Mahmoud, it seems, wants to cut your throat. . . . He is hot-blooded, God bless him! . . . Since he found out"—the peddler winked—"that you pimp for a negress he has considered several ways of exterminating you. . . . When, at the women's pleas, he gives up the idea of hanging you, he wants to burn you; when he decides not to burn you, he wants to stone you to death. . . . At this moment he is thinking of slitting your throat. . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! . . . Never mind! He might well forgive you on the occasion of the wedding. . . . Ah! You didn't know your eldest sister is marrying a rich landowner, the son of Abd Allah the One-Eyed, who died last year. His blood had turned to water. . . . They talk of five thousand *feddans*. . . . It's a fine marriage. . . ."

Goha watched the slices of fried fish the dealer was ranging on a marble slab.

"Are you hungry, Goha?" asked the peddler, smiling. "You look hungry; you are looking at my food. . . . Deign to honour me, Goha. . . . Here is a beautiful slice, here is some bread. . . . You are hungry, aren't you?"

Goha looked into the merchant's eyes.



"Yes, I am hungry," he said in a hollow voice. "I want to eat. Give me a piece of meat."

"Meat? I haven't any," said the peddler, embarrassed. "You don't like fish?"

"Give me some fish," said Goha.

He ate without listening to the merchant, who continued:

"Haj Mahmoud has invited me to the feast. . . . I will miss you, Goha. . . . You would have made some good blunders that would have amused us. . . . Since you are gone the quarter is less amusing. . . . They reproach you with being a pimp, and I'm sure you don't even know what that means. . . . Besides, to each one his destiny."

And Goha drew away.

"Come and see me, Goha, you will give me pleasure. . . . There is always good fish and fresh bread for friends. . . ."

Goha dragged his steps. He felt no satisfaction from having eaten. In his ears clamoured words, words. . . . Why did men have to talk so much?

A woman was lying on the ground. She slept, wrapped in the folds of her *mellaia*. Goha walked around her, undecided, then stopped. With a dark face he opened his caftan and defiled her. He expected to see her wake up, and he stared at her with great gloomy eyes; but she did not move. Goha nudged her with his foot.

"Look, I wet you," he said in a dull voice.

She did not understand at first, but sat up, and then she noticed her clothes were soaked.

"What's that?" she exclaimed. "I'm all wet!"

"I wet you," repeated Goha.

"What are you saying, son of a harlot? You wet me?"

"I wet you."



But for all Goha's repetition of the sentence the woman was too taken aback to understand.

"What have I done to you, son of a harlot?" she exclaimed. "Explain to me. I don't know you and you don't know me. I was sleeping quietly and you came along and wet me. Why, I ask you, did you wet me? Why, son of a harlot? Why?"

And at each question her stupefaction grew. When from afar Goha turned back, the woman, in whom a light had dawned at last, her fist extended toward him, was yelling curses.

He quickened his steps. Eyes down he followed the jerky movements of his feet, that came from under his caftan and ran one after the other. He no longer considered the act he had just committed with the stupidity that had inspired it, but with a clear mind, and he mumbled, "So much the better!" All that men had made him endure of abuse, sarcasm, all the frightful unknown things, the mortifications that events had heaped upon him, all from which he had suffered, which seemed to have slid over him as over a stone, had instead been deposited in the depths of his being. Until then, from time to time the shock of circumstance had evoked in his memory this or that meanness. But it was something else now. The deposit of bitterness had all risen at once. He had loved Waddah Alysum; they had taken him and thrown him into the Nile. . . . He had loved the sheika; men with wigs had carried her away. "You are an idiot." . . . Everybody says that to me: 'You are an idiot.' . . . They too, they are idiots, and they will show me their backsides. . . . Ha! Ha! Show me your backside, Sayed. . . . And you, Khalil, quick, beside Sayed. . . . And you, my sisters, go on, go on, I'm in a hurry! Your backsides, I beg you." As the images grew he slapped his sides with abrupt

laughs. . . . "Your turn, Haj Mahmoud. . . . Yes, father, your turn. . . . If you want to save it, show it to me. . . . And you, water carrier, and you, fried-food seller!" He had been abused because of his patience, because of his humility. Men had made him believe that in their brows shone lights of which he was deprived. He was bigger than they and his patience was at an end. And his daughter. . . . Who had killed his daughter? Who had smashed his daughter's skull? A young effendi was passing. Goha raised his hands with a terrible air. No, it wasn't him. . . . He remembered now. . . . He had gone to sleep on the stairway. When he had opened his eyes his daughter was lying on the flags, her skull open. Her body was shrinking little by little in death. If he hadn't been driven away he would have seen his daughter disappear altogether. On the flags they would have found only a poor dress with nothing in it. At this thought, that there now remained nothing of the little living thing he loved so to cradle, Goha brought his hands to his head and began to run like one possessed.

## XXXVI

### EXPIATION

**G**OHA walked. And as the day declined it seemed to him that he was mounting an incline. He was trampling clouds and walking into the blue. Ah ! how much ground covered ! The city and men were only a memory. Before him it was all frightened stars with long hair of light, blue circles in a blue abyss. "Only God is God," he murmured. "and Mohammed is the Prophet of God ! . . . In an hour I'll pass by one of the little houses I see in the sky, and I'll go to sleep under a tree. . . ."

Meanwhile his babouches stuck in the mud, so abundant in the streets of Cairo that day. His tattered clothes and the tuft of black hair that rose on his skull gave him the appearance of a madman. "I'll go to sleep under a tree," he continued, "and I'll take the moon in my arms and I'll press her to my heart and I'll say, 'Moon, moon . . .' and I'll repeat, 'Moon, moon . . . little moon. . . .'"

He was so weary and so hungry that he rested on his weariness and fed on his hunger. For half a day he had been walking in a circle around a block of houses, but his spirit soared in space and his eyes stared at the stars. Suddenly he saw an extraordinary thing.

A door had opened, disclosing a hashish den. Suffocated, dazzled by the luminous and odorous flood that had suddenly surged out and enveloped him, Goha had the feeling of being welcomed into a new world, created at the end of his journey for his rest and his reward. So it was toward this he had been walking so long !

He breathed in great gulps the perverse odour of hemp, and, advancing a step, perceived recumbent forms through a blue haze. He said to himself: "Which is Allah? Which are the angels? . . ." For what opens before him is not a low-ceilinged, smoky room, but a peaceful universe prepared like an eternal couch for the eternal rest of all beings. Before, in the time of his happy carelessness, he had believed in a Paradise peopled with lascivious women, enchanting voices, fruit-trees and flowers. But that could not have been Paradise, since it would be necessary to climb the trees to pick the fruit, to bend down to pluck the flowers, and to break one's back with the women.

"I'll leave my babouches at the door," he thought, "and I'll go in. . . . I'll make no noise, so as not to disturb these great sheiks, these angels and Allah. . . . In a corner I'll find a vacant tile. . . . I'll stretch out on my back, and it will be for ever. . . ."

Although he was going toward happiness, tears filled his eyes. He thought of the mortal brothers he was leaving behind, and he had a vision of columns of human beings carried away in a hurricane of madness, smashing one against the other. . . . "I have withdrawn from them, and they continue," he thought. "It isn't I, then, that they resented. . . ."

Piously, down to the ground, Goha saluted Paradise and crossed its threshold.

At once an indignant voice arose:

"Who is that dog who has just come in?"

And fingers gripped Goha's wrists. He emitted a roar. It seemed to him that the earth had given way under his feet. Where was he? Into what infernal pit had he fallen?

"So, son of a viper, you've killed your child! . . ."

A yellow man, with bleeding eyelids, with muscles of

steel, was twisting his arms. The smokers whom the hashish had not altogether stupefied followed the scene with foolish eyes and strove to understand.

"You conceived her in sin; you killed her in sin," continued the man, who was one of Hawa's clients. "I saw it in your face that your heart was kneaded in dung. . . . Brothers," he said, turning toward the smokers without relaxing his grip, "if you want to know a negress's pimp, look at him! . . ."

He explained that this degenerate son of Haj Mahmoud Riazzy had committed more crimes than a whole generation of men. He had violated Hawa, he had violated Nour al-Ein, the wife of his protector, he had strangled two of his sisters and Waddah Alysum, one of his friends. . . .

"When his mother was pregnant he struck her in the belly to make her miscarry. . . . He is a dog; I tell you he's a dog."

Crazy-eyed Goha saw opening around him great flabby mouths, from which came fetid breaths and frightful noises. A score of fists came down on him, lifted him up. . . . He found himself in the street, driven forward by irresistible forces. He allowed himself to be led docilely as long as he saw the way open before him, but at each turn of the road, seized with terror, he pushed back, set his feet to grip the ground. The smokers fell upon him and forced him to go on.

Having pushed him far into the desert the smokers stopped, stupefied. For what purpose had they gone so far from the city? . . . And this man, what was he doing among them? Dull of face, they questioned with their eyes Hawa's client, who had led them on. This one, no less astonished than his companions, opened his mouth as if to speak, thought for a long minute and repeated:

"He's a dog!"

"He has the snout of a dog and the ears of a dog," said another.

"A dog, it's evidently a dog," said a third.

Goha had that day spent the last ounce of his energy. On the way from the smoke-den to the desert he had still been able, stimulated by terror, to defend himself against these strangers. But now he had reached the end. He looked at the smokers without knowing what to say, for he didn't know what was wanted of him. As for the smokers, they were acting without conviction. They, too, did not know what they had to do, and seemed to be playing an annoying rôle, whose end they had forgotten. They nodded their heads, snickered. . . .

"Look. . . . By Allah! he has dog's teeth!"

"I'm not a dog," said Goha in a weary voice. "Do what you have to do and let me sleep. . . ."

He was tired with so much monotony, so much insanity. In each sentence, in each motion, of the men who surrounded him he sensed emptiness. He had no more fear, he had no more hate. What he felt was an emotion similar to disgust and pity. But had he not once before lived through this moment? The impression of emptiness that emanated from the smokers this evening—every man he had met in his life had given it to him. What they did was never the expression of themselves. All acted without will, through foolishness or idleness.

"If you put your foot in Cairo again we'll throw your mangy dog's carcass into the Nile."

But Goha was not listening. He had dropped on the sand. Suddenly he noticed the silence about him. A slight breeze glided over his shaven head and filled his top-knot. He raised his head. All was calm. A few mausoleums stood out white in the moonlight. He lay on his back and carefully spread his bruised limbs on the sand. . . .

He regained consciousness with the realisation that



he was hungry. His eyes had been open a long time already. It was broad daylight.

The taste of favourite dishes floated in his mouth and rose to his brain. Then he began to talk aloud :

“ Do you like quails with rice, Goha ? Yes. . . . I like them.”

He resumed :

“ Do you like a lamb tender as a pistachio, Goha ? ”

His confused ideas seemed all to shout at once. He found himself as though in the middle of an assembly of noisy persons, and in the tumult he strove to put in a word.

“ Do you like good dishes, Goha ? Good dishes full to the brim ? ” he roared. . . . And after a silence he murmured, “ Then eat, eat. . . .”

His brain, exalted by a frenzied need of abundance, rolled heaps of meat like great clouds.

Before him the sun danced in the ravines, searched the hills of refuse, flamed on the points of the rocks. The desert sparkled with its innumerable quartzes and chinks. Rubies rolled down the slopes in cascades, molten gold boiled in the depressions. . . . He threw himself in pursuit of these fabulous treasures, seized the gold and the jewels in handfuls. . . . But all around him wealth was teeming. He took off his caftan, which he filled at once. One by one his clothes came off. Naked at last, he amassed his fortune in heaps.

“ It is sand and stones,” he said in a soft voice, and a smile wandered over his face. All the time he had been picking up the imaginary treasures, someone had been saying within him : “ What are you doing ? It’s only sand and stones. . . .” And he had continued just the same, playing with his illusion :

“ Quails . . . quails . . . quails. . . .”

He saw a Bedouin pass, tunic flying, mounted on a

camel swift as an arrow, muzzle hanging to the ground. Beetles with metallic sheen travelled along the sinuosities of the ground, butterflies fluttered and flies buzzed.

On the minaret of Amru the muezzin sang, and his voice carried, attenuated like a lamentation. It was the hour of prayer; Goha began to pray.

"In the name of God, clement and merciful, a dish of quail for Goha. . . . I have eaten nothing since birth. . . . You only have to smell my breath. . . . Praise be to God, Minister of the Universe. . . ."

The voice of the muezzin mingles with the sounds of the twilight. From the height of the minaret it leaps over space, seeking in the desert the rare faithful who find themselves scattered there.

"Come to the benediction! Come to prayer! God is great!"

Goha continues:

"The breath of him who fasts is an exquisite perfume to God . . . and a good dish filled to the brim is also a good thing. . . ."

"God is great! God is great!"

The sacred words linger indefinitely, and the muezzin stops to listen to this celestial music whose first notes were born in him. From the north, the south, the west start similar calls. . . . Goha with buzzing head continues his prayer:

"No, I am not content. . . . Sovereign, on the day of retribution it is you whom we adore, it is you whose aid we implore! . . ."

The voice of the muezzin has ceased. Goha has stopped, and watches Cairo, where lanterns are shining. Over there is a room with soft rugs, with deep divans. And in that room there is an old man, hospitable and tender—Sheik al-Zaki. Goha rises and, without realising that he is naked, starts toward the city.

## XXXVII

### MABROUKA'S HOUR

MABROUKA was lying on her bed, wearing a pink chemise. Sheik al-Zaki was preparing to leave her. Reaching the door, he turned his worn face toward the old wife who followed him with langorous eyes, and said gently:

"Good-bye, my love . . . good-bye. . . ."

At this moment a clamour rose from the courtyard. He retraced his steps, opened the window and felt on his face a gust of damp air.

"It is Khalil quarrelling with a passer-by," he murmured. Suddenly stepping back: "Oh! Oh! What insolence!"

He could not continue; indignation choked him. Mabrouka, curious, jumped from her bed and ran to the window.

"No! No!" he cried, pushing her back.

"I haven't seen anything yet," protested Mabrouka, leaning out.

She looked. When she had taken a good look, she gave a demure cry and covered her face with both hands.

"My God! A naked man! You shouldn't have let me look, my dear. . . ."

"I knew the sight would shock you," said al-Zaki.

His eyelids fluttered. He was pleased with his Mabrouka; he was moved by so much candour. Mabrouka also was moved to see him satisfied with her. They smiled at each other, tenderly intimate. One would have said their own love had just been put to a

test and had emerged from it strengthened. At times, it is true, Mabrouka cast furtive glances into the court, but each time she pressed lovingly against her husband, who caressed her white and plump shoulders.

"Let him go to his father's," she said. "Let him go anywhere he wants, that procurer. . . ."

"Who? Who?" asked Sheik al-Zaki, suddenly uneasy. "Do you know that man?"

"You haven't recognised him?"

"No."

"Our neighbour's son. . . ."

"Goha . . ." he breathed.

Seized with a lively agitation, he began to walk up and down, scowling. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"What shall we do? What shall we do with that man?"

Mabrouka, who had regained her bed, murmured carelessly:

"After the adventure of Nour al-Ein . . ."

"Hold your tongue!" roared al-Zaki.

He resumed his walk with quickened step. He wanted to think, and he thought of nothing but his will to think.

Mabrouka knew these fits, more and more infrequent however, when Sheik al-Zaki strove, always in vain, to impress a direction upon his thoughts. She feared for him and for herself. Never before the decrepitude of her husband's mind had she known so much happiness. She now had an affectionate, assiduous husband who appreciated her advice and sought her intimacy, a husband such as she had dreamed of. The other, the dreamer who shut himself up in his solitary meditations, had disappeared. Nevertheless she watched. Softly, in a languid voice, she said:

"Ah! my dear, I am dying of the heat. . . . I am burning and perspiring, my love. . . ."

She sat up, took off her chemise and, lying down again, turned her back to Sheik al-Zaki. The latter was still struggling mentally ; he had succeeded only in changing his formula : " I must decide," he was thinking, " I must decide ! " And each time his eyes turned to Mabrouka's body, his rage rose. The sight of that body obsessed him. Stopping sharply, in an effort of reaction, he exclaimed : " This is what I have come to ! " Nour al-Ein, Waddah Alysum, his long vigils in the library, his tours of Moslem propaganda, his conferences at the university, all that was no more. The philosopher had closed his books, his pupils had chosen other masters, Alysum and Nour al-Ein were dead, Islam was crumbling to dust. . . .

" What is there left to me ? " he exclaimed, his eyes charged with anger. " That ! That ! "—he pointed his finger toward Mabrouka. " Those big white buttocks are left to me ! "

Mabrouka was silent, guessing that the slightest word would be fatal. A second time her happiness was in danger. She sought to efface herself against the wall, and with a trembling hand, as discreetly as possible, she drew the cover over her body. A heavy silence reigned in the room. The voices outside resounded distinctly.

Sheik al-Zaki leaned out of the window with a resolute air and dryly called the porter. The two voices ceased.

" Let that man come up," he commanded. " I have something to say to him."

And he left the room. On the way to the library he reflected on the manner in which he had given his command, on the dry voice he had used. As for the command itself, he did not think of it until he had seated himself on the divan. He started. " Why did I tell that man to come up ? Why ? " As always, his thoughts



wandered as soon as he tried to fix them upon a definite question.

Suddenly he saw the portières raised and Goha appear, covered with a great red shawl that Khalil had thrown over his shoulders.

"He isn't naked. So much the better!" thought the sheik. Then, noticing the ashen face, the fevered look, the wretched appearance of this man whose vigour and beauty he had so often admired, he wondered if Goha had not come to his house to die, or to confide to him some extraordinary secret. "Has he gone mad?" he thought again, noticing that Goha was smiling at him in a strange manner.

The surroundings pleased Goha. In this library he felt himself in safety. He felt at ease in suddenly finding himself there again.

"Sit down," said al-Zaki sharply, seeing Goha take a seat. "And now explain what you want quickly. Why aren't you dressed? Where do you come from? I am vexed that you presented yourself at my door in the dress of a Sudanese. . . . You will notice, besides, that the Sudanese are careful to cover . . ." And as his thoughts became muddled he snapped his fingers and raised his voice. "Even if we were among savages I could not permit, no, indeed I could not permit . . ."

For a moment he cast about for the name of the thing he wanted to forbid, then ended his speech with an emphatic gesture.

"Is the coffee coming?" asked Goha with a sly air.

"You are thirsty?"

"Yes, I'm hungry."

"If you are hungry, it isn't coffee you need, it is rather something to eat."

"Yes, quails."

"What a fall!" thought al-Zaki. "One might



take him for a beast . . . a beast. . . . Why a beast ? . . . ”

“ Ibrahim ! ” he called in a strident voice. “ Bring some food ! ”

Soon afterward the eunuch appeared with a platter loaded with sour milk, cheeses, honey and various salted meats. He stared at Goha with a sullen air that Goha did not notice.

The slaves had rejoiced at Mabrouka's return, in which they saw an indication of their master's return to a material life they could understand and approve. They feared now that the son of Mahmoud would upset the re-established order of things.

Without haste, his eyes half-closed, Goha emptied one by one the vegetable dishes, the fruit dishes. Al-Zaki, amazed, asked him if it had not been a long time since he had eaten.

“ I want to sleep,” answered Goha.

He stretched himself on the divan and went to sleep. The sheik crossed his arms. He was sulky, undecided. Goha's slumber made him feel as though he had been abandoned by all men.

He went down to the garden, rounded his ancestor's mausoleum. The morning was hot. He walked the paths, finding in the trees, in the flowers, a new aspect, and a new aspect in himself. His brow felt heavy, and from this he conceived great hopes and joy.

Goha's return had wrenched him from the moral torpor into which Mabrouka had cast him. That woman had woven a net of sensuality and commonplace pre-occupations around him at a time when, abandoned by some, betrayed by others, he found himself without power to resist, disposed to any servitude. Nour al-Ein's unhealthy grace, anticipating the event, already had prepared him for this abdication, but the young

woman had bent all her art to keeping him ignorant of it. Mabrouka, with her heavy manner, did not employ so much subtlety. Besides, she was not forced to the same precautions; the man that circumstances had placed in her hands had lost all moral energy. She finished to her advantage the work of her rival, heavily, as she did everything.

Revolt rumbled within Sheik al-Zaki. There must be an end to this abasement! And while he made this decision, by a sudden veering of thought, he thought of Goha, alone in the library, almost naked. "I should not have left him without a watch, so near the harem," he muttered. For half-an-hour he had been walking in the garden. His legs trembled. He feared for Mabrouka.

"So much the worse! So much the worse!" he said aloud. "I won't go!"

He felt that in giving way to the disorder of his emotions he would give the lie to his resolution of a new life, would fall back into his weakness. But in restraining himself he brutally violated his nature. Blood rushed to his head, perspiration flooded his face, his whole body.

"So much the worse! So much the worse!" he exclaimed.

This was his last effort over himself. Obscene images haunted his brain. He began to run.

Before Mabrouka's room he stopped and listened. He thought he heard a strange noise. Feverishly he seized the knob and noisily opened the door.

She was there alone, near the window: fright had made her drop the mouthpiece of her narghile.

"What is it? What is the matter with you?" she exclaimed, getting up.

Nothing! Nothing had happened. Al-Zaki was

well aware of it, and his suspicions seemed to him unreasonable and humiliating.

"Never mind, Mabrouka, there is nothing the matter with me," he begged, trying to conceal his breathlessness.

By his voice, by the expression of his face she understood that he was returning to her altogether. She resolved at once to destroy in its essence the thing that had imperilled her labours. She took him by the shoulders.

"So it is Goha who has been giving you trouble, poor dear? It is that dog of a Goha?"

He had not the strength to repulse her and allowed himself to be led to the divan, where he sank heavily. Mabrouka wiped his brow, covered it with kisses, accompanying each caress with a question. He could not help smiling, for he did not find this rush of cajolery displeasing.

"There is nothing the matter with me, my dear; calm yourself," he said, with good humour. "I came to be with you and I opened the door a little roughly . . . that is all."

She nodded her head in silence, her eyes as though charged with a vision of far-off calamities that, by a special gift, she alone could even foresee.

"What is Goha doing?" she asked.

"He is sleeping."

"As soon as he wakes up you will give him some clothes and send him away," she said gravely.

"That is what I expect to do."

"You will only have to tell him that what happened between Nour al-Ein and him is enough for you, and that . . ."

"I will know what to tell him," interrupted al-Zaki.

She stopped speaking, offered him a narghile and some coffee. For a long time they remained silent,

Mabrouka absorbed in her thoughts and Sheik al-Zaki seeking to guess them. Suddenly she began to smile. He smiled in his turn and said, moving nearer :

"Tell me. . . ."

"An idea !"

"Well, tell me your idea."

"You remember Alysum ?"

"He was my dearest friend !"

But for all his sighing and staring at his babouches, he could not make himself sad.

"He died at the right moment, that one," resumed Mabrouka, touching his beard. "Warda the dallala has told me stories ! . . ."

"Ah ?" said al-Zaki in a low voice.

"Nour al-Ein had engaged her to speak to Waddah Alysum. . . ."

He made no movement, did not protest. What he had just learned, it seemed to him he had always known.

"Warda pretends she refused indignantly to serve as go-between and that Nour al-Ein had recourse to her slave Amina. . . . However, there were some negotiations, and it was the day on which he was to meet Nour al-Ein that Waddah Alysum died. . . ."

"I know . . ." murmured Sheik al-Zaki.

"It is fortunate that he died," Mabrouka concluded.

"Fortunate, yes. . . ."

"It is true that if he had not died, there would not have been Goha . . ."

Sheik al-Zaki nodded assent.

## XXXVIII

### AL-ZAKI BEFORE HIS SHADOW

**A**T noon Goha still slept. Stretched on the divan, in front of him, Sheik al-Zaki also slept. Both snored. At times a head appeared in the doorway, assumed an expression of dismay and disappeared.

"Well, Ibrahim?" Mabrouka asked.

"Nothing. . . . The master sleeps and the dog sleeps."

"Let us wait," answered Mabrouka quietly.

Sheik al-Zaki awoke. He sat up and considered Goha with a stupid air. Goha had not stirred.

Toward night, after prayers, al-Zaki calculated that his guest had slept sixteen hours. He overturned a stand: Goha did not flinch. He closed, opened, re-closed, reopened the window without result. He gave the bookcase a formidable kick, shook the curtains, threw his reed pen and a sheet of paper on the rug.

"He will never wake up!" he exclaimed.

And he ran from one piece of furniture to another, gesticulating, uttering abuses, when he suddenly noticed that Goha, wide-eyed, was watching him with silent interest. He stopped, embarrassed, while Goha encouraged him with hand and voice:

"Well, Sheik, well, you are stopping? . . ."

"I am stopping because I have done what I had to do," retorted the sheik haughtily.

And he explained gravely:

"A dangerous insect had got in. But I managed to reach it and kill it."

Standing up, Goha stretched himself.

"Cover yourself," said the master dryly, handing him the shawl that had slipped to the floor.

Goha looked at himself and began to laugh.

"Somebody has taken my clothes," he said.

"Nobody in my house has taken your clothes; you came naked and you remained naked. . . . Besides, I am going to give you some clothes."

"What clothes?"

"Some of mine."

"And you, what will you do? If you give me your clothes you will be naked!" exclaimed Goha, much amused by this idea.

"Have no worry on my account," retorted the sheik crossly. "I am not going to undress to give you clothes."

"Then give!" exclaimed Goha. "Because I am ashamed to show myself to people the way I am."

"I was very much astonished to see you come that way into my house."

"Oh! Between ourselves, I love you vrey much, you know, Sheik. And now I expect to remain with you always."

"Really!" answered the shiek crossly. "You imagine I am going to keep you? Know, once for all, that it is impossible."

Goha sat down. He clasped his hands, shaking his head. Al-Zaki's roughness had saddened him.

"You are angry with me," he said. "For a long time you have been angry with Goha. . . . Yes . . . yes. . . . That is why I did not come to see you any more. . . . But listen, father, where do you want me to go? The whole world, I have seen it, and I have not been able to stay anywhere."

"How, the whole world?"

"The whole world!" repeated Goha, who suddenly



spoke from the bottom of a desolate soul. "I wasn't able to remain anywhere, not with Haj Mahmoud, nor with Hawa, nor near the cemetery. . . . What shall I do then?"

Al-Zaki felt himself unjust and unkind. He said nothing, because he was incapable of opposing a sincere argument to Goha. After a silence he said:

"Let us proceed in order. . . . You are risking a cold when you stay undressed like that, and you must be hungry. . . . I will give you something to eat and some clothes."

These attentions only increased Goha's melancholy. He was offered material satisfactions, and what he needed was a refuge for his soul.

"As you like, Sheik," he said softly.

After having given instructions to the eunuch, al-Zaki went to the harem to consult Mabrouka. In his weakness he placed his hope in her. She had lived for thirty years of his life, they had grown old together. How could she fail to understand the state of his soul, his scruples, at this hour that was so great a burden to his conscience?

He entered her room, sure that at his first word the treasures of goodness he needed to act according to his best self would spring from the heart of his wife. But as he neared the window at which she leaned Mabrouka said:

"Is Goha gone?"

He understood that their talk would not be the one he had hoped for and, dissatisfied, he frowned.

"I have been here two hours and I haven't seen him go out," Mabrouka resumed.

"No, he does not want to go," answered al-Zaki in a truculent voice.

He resented the fact that Mabrouka did not share his worry on Goha's account. He also resented the

morbid curiosity that had caused her to sit for hours to see a man pass who might be naked. But he was not clearly conscious of this. He only felt that she was at fault. Mabrouka burst out laughing :

“He doesn’t want to go ? . . . Well, all you can do, then, is to keep him.”

“Mabrouka !” he exclaimed, beside himself. “Don’t imagine I will stand your insolence any longer !”

“My insolence ! . . .” she said, untroubled, but with an astonished face. “My insolence, O Nabi ! . . . And when have I been insolent ? And why should I have been insolent ? . . . Was I not born of an honourable mother and a respected father ? Have I not been a faithful and agreeable wife ? . . . Ask Warda the dallala what she thinks of my virtue and beauty ! And I was insolent, I who this very night . . .”

Sheik al-Zaki, embarrassed by this memory, attempted to interrupt. She continued, with signs of growing amazement :

“My insolence ! . . . When only yesterday I came near having a stroke of apoplexy arguing with the cook who grills the mutton too much when you like it tender since the barber pulled your teeth—I weep when I think of what you suffered that day—but at the same time, how can one keep teeth that swell your cheeks ?—Just the same, if I saw that barber, I feel I would faint. My insolence ! . . . When I don’t find a single dress that is worthy of the wife of a great sheik like you. . . . And why this insolence ? Because you told me Goha wanted to stay and I answered either to keep him or to put him out. . . . Because you must either keep him or put him out. . . . If you know of a third way, tell me, O master. . . . You are an intelligent man, the sun is in your brain. . . . Tell it so she may know, tell it to your servant, this third way. . . .”

"I am seeking it," said al-Zaki, touching his forehead. Suddenly he assumed a terrible expression.

"I'll go and see," he said, leaving the room.

When Sheik al-Zaki entered the library Goha had finished eating. He turned to the sheik a beaming face, half-buried under the enormous turban he had just been given, along with a silken caftan. Al-Zaki felt himself reduced to nothing before this solid boy with his dazzling youth. A few hours earlier he had believed him in agony, consumed by an incurable illness, and now he saw him transfigured. To recover all his vigour it had been enough for him to eat, drink and sleep.

"You say you have seen the whole world. You are joking," said al-Zaki quickly.

He had spoken these words at random to cover his worry. Now he took interest in them.

"What you take for the world is only our city of Cairo. . . ."

He added, more and more pleased with the idea :

"My poor child, you have seen nothing of the world, and you say you have seen the whole world ! If you knew the size of Cairo compared to the globe ! . . ."

"Oh !" said Goha, whose meal and beautiful clothes disposed to optimism, "the world is great. . . . All here below is a question of fate . . . Some are fat and the others are thin. . . . A bird that walks does not resemble a camel that flies. . . . Is that not so, Sheik ?"

"Doubtless," said al-Zaki, dumbfounded. And regaining his composure at once : "But you must be confused . . . unless by the flying camel you mean a chimera. . . ."

Goha interrupted him :

"And the man ?" he said, with a lively interest.

"How is the man ?"

"What man ?"

"Why, the man you put in oil. . . . By the grace of God, I hope he is well?"

Sheik al-Zaki closed his eyes, dizzy.

At the time of his conversation with Goha and Waddah Alysum he had smiled at the Fool's remarks. Even when he exclaimed, "Strange creature!" or wondered over this odd product of nature, he retained in the bottom of his mind the smiling certainty of his own superiority. In truth, he had reduced Goha to the conception he had formed of him, and had assigned him a pigeon-hole in his thoughts.

Now he had before him a free, independent man, who quietly made remarks he could not understand. "What is he saying?" he thought. "Where am I? Of us two, which is the idiot, the madman or the dead?" The dead . . . for there was between them more than a difference of mentality. They must belong to different worlds. . . . The miracle was that they had met!

Goha waited patiently for an answer that did not come and, by dint of waiting, forgot his question. He approached the window. Sheik al-Zaki followed him mechanically. Suddenly he had a feeling of being entirely enveloped by Goha, who, taller than he, looked down into the street over his shoulder. Troubled, he raised his eyes and met, very close, those of the Fool. Never had Goha seemed to him so handsome, never had a human face given him that impression of splendour. He took a step backward.

Inside the library the darkness was complete. From the street rose a laugh, always the same. A bat bumped into the wall. Goha put his hand to his head to protect it.

"I did not remember I had your turban," he said, surprised to find on his head the philosopher's enormous head-piece.

"You remember nothing," murmured Sheik al-Zaki.

Ibrahim entered and lit the seven tapers of the candelabra.

"Oh!" said Goha, noticing on the rug, on the walls, on the ceiling, the shadows the light had suddenly created.

He repeated:

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"What is the matter?" asked Sheik al-Zaki, impressed.

Goha did not answer. He made a gesture, several shadows moved, jostled each other. Delighted, he watched them.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"What is the matter?" cried Sheik al-Zaki in a panic. Then he roared:

"Goha! Goha! Goha! Answer me, what is the matter?"

Goha turned to him his dilated pupils.

"It is she . . ." he murmured. "Oh! . . ." Mysteriously he added: "The sheika. . ."

And, filled with the need of unburdening himself, he began to speak in a low voice:

"You, you don't know who the sheika is. . . . Hush! Hush! Master, hush! You mustn't repeat it. . . ."

He told how long ago the sheika sat in the garden, where she spoke to no one. Then he had climbed on her bench and had given her a slap; whereupon, mad with anger, she had got up to put an evil genie at his heels. Fortunately, the evil genie was gentle, calm and good. In all circumstances it had acted with moderation. It rolled around Goha's legs. It impeded his walk. Its malignity was no greater than that.

"One day they took the sheika. . . . Yes, they took her! What was to be done? . . . The genie they hadn't

taken. What to do ? What to do ? . . . I climbed the terrace and saw the sheika ! ”

Al-Zaki was seized with trembling. Goha, intoxicated, raised his voice :

“ She had changed her dress, the sheika. . . . She wore a yellow gallabiah. . . . ”

“ With a border of gold,” added the sheik in a hollow voice.

“ Ah ! You know. . . . But you don’t know what we did ! ” resumed Goha with a big laugh. “ It is shameful, master ! Hush ! Hush ! ”

“ You are a swine ! ” scolded the sheik, dizzy with a rush of blood to the head.

“ Hush ! Hush ! Master, you mustn’t tell anyone. . . . There ! There ! Look . . . look . . . the sheika’s genie ! ”

Al-Zaki was breathing noisily, caught up by the delirium of Goha, who was pointing to the shadows on the wall, chanting :

“ *When you look at it, it moves. . . .*

*And when you light the candle it comes. . . .*

*And when you take away the candle, it goes away,*

*And when I look at it, it moves. . . . ”*

The philosopher’s eyes followed the simple one’s hand. Through the open window came the echo of nocturnal celebrations, the sound of the lute and the tambourine.

Suddenly a breeze passes, and in passing stirs the flames of the candelabra.

“ Oh, father ! ” exclaimed Goha, drunk with joy. “ The sheika ! The sheika ! ”

He tore off his turban and flung it on the floor, yelling louder and louder.



"The sheika! The sheika! She is coming down. . . . She is waiting for me. . . . Ah! You have beautiful hands! Ah! You have beautiful breasts!"

He leaped forward. Sheik al-Zaki threw himself on him.

"What are you saying? The sheika? What are you saying?"

He needed explanations. Jealousy was grinding his heart. Who was this woman who waited for him?

"Where is she? Answer me! . . . Show her to me! . . . Ah! you imagine I'll let you go down, that I will let you meet. . . ."

For the first time, he saw in Goha his equal and his enemy.

"You have always deceived me with your airs of an idiot!" he resumed hatefully. "But you won't commit your filthinesses together to-night!"

Meanwhile Goha, who was struggling, succeeded in releasing his fists, and with all his strength he brought them down on the sheik's head. Then, with a yell of joy, he bounded out of the room.

Sheik al-Zaki, who had dropped on the divan, came to himself, hearing Mabrouka's voice:

"Come on and see, my dear," she said. "For a full quarter of an hour Goha has been talking with a woman in front of your door."

Al-Zaki leaned out of the window and saw this mad vision surging in his brain—Goha and Nour al-Ein walking away, pressed one against the other.

## XXXIX

### GOHA'S PALACES

**G**OHA had scarcely crossed the doorway when a woman had accosted him. "One moment! My star, wait!" she said in a coaxing voice. "I've been waiting for you since dawn. Let me look at you. . . . By Allah, it's Goha himself! . . . And you are beautiful as a star, and you are dressed like a sheik!"

Goha felt a pinch in the belly and the voice continued: "Ah! Indeed you're a rascal to pass naked like a bull under the windows of a young widow. . . . You knew what you were doing, rascal. . . . The poor little one is dying of love!"

The woman was enormous. In the black *mellaia* that enveloped her altogether, her hips and her breasts bobbed like water-skins. Goha found her desirable and beautiful. He put out his hand to unveil her face.

"Allah! You are crazy! I'm not the one. . . . If you saw my face you'd be cooled for the rest of your days!"

"You pinched me, I want to see," insisted Goha.

"A little patience, my star, and you will have something to feast your eye on. . . ."

She surprised a covetous gleam in Goha's eyes and added in a motherly voice:

"There was only one woman in the world to watch over you and prepare your happiness, and that woman was Warda, Warda the dallala, Warda the one-eyed. . . . I've made your fortune, son of Riazzy! You will have palaces and lands, you will have slaves and horses,

you will become a great personage, and you will grow a beard ! ”

She caught hold of him and suddenly made herself humble and suppliant.

“ Goha, Goha, consider my existence . . . . I have worked all my life, I have run like a she-dog from house to house and I haven’t a sequin put by. No husband to feed me and no daughter to sell ! Goha, you will be rich and powerful. . . . I don’t ask much. . . . A little house at Bulak and two sequins a month until I die ; that is all I ask of you, master. . . . Be generous, master. . . . ”

He listened to her, nodded his head and answered :

“ You want a house, Warda ; and why not ? You want two sequins a month ; and why not, Warda ? ”

“ Illustrious son of Haj Mahmoud ! ” exclaimed the dallala. “ Honour of the Riazys ! Messenger of Providence ! You are the pearl among pearls ! And now, come. . . . We are expected ! ”

Warda had passed the night with Nazli Hanem, widow and only heir of the powerful Mameluke Ibrahim Bey. At dawn she had been awakened by lamentations.

“ Oh ! Where did that man come from ? ” Nazli Hanem was moaning. “ And who sent this man under my window ? Don’t they know I am a widow and alone for sixteen months ? I beseech you, tell me, who is that man ? . . . Let him go away, or else come up, that man ! Let him come up, or let him go to the devil, that man ! ”

And Nazli Hanem, who was looking into the street through the lattice, pulled at her cheeks framed in black hair.

“ Warda, auntie, look. . . . People without pity have sent a naked man under my window. . . . ”

“ Calm yourself, my sweet pigeon,” the dallala had

answered. "I know that man. He is of good family, he is handsome, he is healthy. If you like, you have only to give me the word . . ."

Warda had descended in all haste, but Goha was already far away. She had called to him in vain, she had run without catching up to him, as far as Sheik al-Zaki's house. Because she was tenacious and wished the happiness of Nazli and the happiness of Goha, she had waited patiently, squatting at the door.

Goha suddenly found himself in a little vaulted gallery lighted by a lantern. The go-between dropped her *mellaia* and emitted a strident *zalgouta*.

"Oh! Oh!" protested Goha. "You've burst my ears!"

"Take the stairway in front of you," said Warda. She pushed him before her and began to cry:

"Where are you, sisters? . . . Run, all of you! I am bringing you the groom!"

Then began over Goha's head an indescribable hubbub. One could hear furniture falling, people running, women calling to each other. Goha, awed, stammered:

"Let me go; let me go away. . . ."

"He wants to go away! He says he wants to go away!" shouted the go-between, holding Goha with all her strength. "Allah! Allah! Run, sisters! He'll escape me!"

A wave of light invaded the upper landing. Seven or eight women appeared, scantily dressed, with white, black or coppery faces, with woolly heads or hair hanging over their shoulders. One carried a candle, another a night-light; all laughed and talked at once.

Pushed up to the landing, dazzled by the little flames the slave held before his eyes the better to see him, Goha remained open-mouthed. He felt alien in this palace, where everyone laughed at once.

"Take him, Halima!"

"He is for you, Tronga."

"Help! Help!"

Goha, finally put at ease by the women's teasing, had taken possession of a little negress with white teeth, when suddenly the voices ceased. A young woman had just appeared. Her hair and eyes were black; over her rich flesh floated a gold-spangled blue veil, that made Goha think of the sky when all the stars are shining. She stopped a few paces from him. She looked at him in silence and her heart pounded.

"Give her a tender word," interposed the go-between.  
"Take her in your arms, my child."

But Goha, awed, lowered his eyes. Nazli Hanem blushed and in her turn lowered her eyes. Warda became impatient.

"Well, darlings, well! Life is short! Approach, my little quail; approach, my big duck. . . ."

She took Nazli Hanem and Goha by the hand and led them into a room dominated by a monumental copper bed and an immense Venetian mirror. While the go-between closed the door the young woman threw herself at the neck of Goha, who clasped her in his arms.

"Wait, my daughter, wait a little!" cried the dallala.  
"Let us first sit on the divan and discuss our affairs. . . . I'll be brief," she continued, when all three were seated, "but there are still a few things to be arranged. . . . Goha has promised me a little house and two sequins a month. There is no going back on that. . . . Now, let's talk of the wedding. . . . I must arrange the festivities, buy the scarves and the silk handkerchiefs for the guests. . . ."

"We'll talk of that to-morrow, auntie. . . ."

"Yes, to-morrow," repeated Goha feverishly.

"To-morrow, to-morrow . . . and why not at once? Warda is an orderly person, Warda knows what is customary."

Nazli Hanem went and opened a trunk encrusted with mother-of-pearl, of which she carried the key, counted five hundred sequins and gave them to the dallala. The latter could not control her emotion. Cheeks on fire, voice trembling, she mumbled :

"Enjoy yourselves, my sweet angels, enjoy yourselves. . . . Warda is looking after you and blesses you. . . ."

When they found themselves alone Goha and Nazli Hanem dared not approach each other. Their freedom troubled them, they almost regretted that Warda had gone. Nazli Hanem stammered shamefacedly :

"You'll think me a woman of no dignity. . . . And still I swear to you, Goha, I am loyal ; I swear my heart is white. . . ."

She slid down on the rug and laid an anxious face on Goha's knee. He breathed in her sadness and, his fingers in her loosened hair, he murmured :

"Sheika, sheika beautiful as the face of the morning, sheika beautiful as the heel of the happiness !"

He paused. His eyes grew dreamy. . . . The emotion that had been born in him over there, under the tamarisk of Ghezireh, for the goddess of stone, and that had blossomed little by little in the warm embrace of Nour al-Ein, now enveloped this woman who was before him. The image of the divinity, that of the daughter of Melek, that of Nazli stood along this single great love like three villages along a river.

"How many times, how many times, sheika, have I lost you ; and how many times have I found you again ! You were in the garden and they took you from your bench ; you were on the terrace and they sent you back



to your father. . . . Now it is all over. . . . I don't want ever to lose you again ! ”

“ You love me, then,” murmured Nazli, thrilled at the thought that she was marrying a poet.

Her voice was sweet as honey, her skin was white as the lily that floats on the water between two green leaves. Listening to her, looking at her, Goha felt that something within him had changed. The adventures of his life had matured him. He had need of calm. He had become a man.

“ I have seen extraordinary things in my life,” he said. “ What I have seen, no one has seen. . . . I know Ghezireh and I know the graveyard. . . . I know Sayed the orange-seller, Omar, the keeper of the tombs, and Sheik al-Zaki, the keeper of the books. . . . The genie who walks with people, I see and no one else sees. How one puts a man in oil, I have heard told with my own ears, and I know. How one changes beans for sheep, when you want to learn it, it is of me that you will have to ask. . . . I have seen negresses turn white at night, I have seen the desert change into precious stones, and the stars fall on genii.”

“ You are learned and intelligent,” answered the young woman. “ I, on the contrary, am ignorant. . . . You will teach me what you know.”

She sat beside Goha and embraced him passionately. But Goha had not finished talking. He released himself gently and continued :

“ I have seen extraordinary things. . . . That is why I was a child and have become a man. . . . Selling a leg of mutton, receiving Hawa's clients, ironing fezzes, all that is worth nothing to me. . . . I must rest myself in a house, with a wife, with children, and with the children of my children. . . . ”

“ Allah is merciful,” said Nazli Hanem. “ I am glad

that now you can help me with your advice. . . . My revenues are diminishing since the Bey's death, my stewards are robbing me, the money I save I don't know how to invest. . . . A man is needed in the house. . . . After to-morrow you will take over the management of my affairs. . . ."

"What must be, will be," answered Goha gravely, "but a woman cannot become a man. . . ."

At this moment he saw at the end of the room his image reflected in the Venetian mirror. He was surprised to find himself in these sumptuous surroundings, with a beautiful woman at his side, and he understood that a new life was opening up before him.











